NOSLEEP EBOOK
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Front Matter

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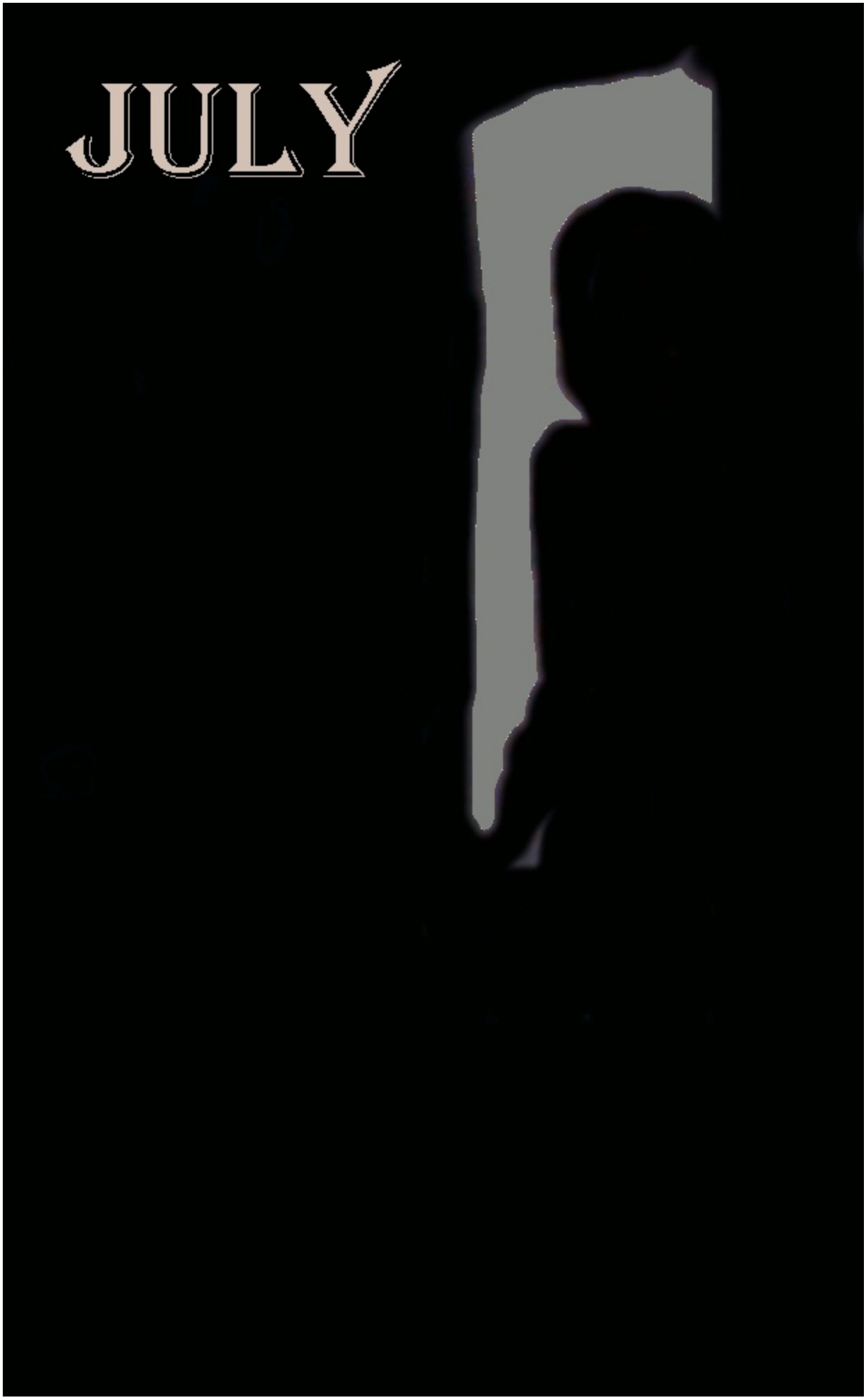
The eBook is compiled by Kristopher J. Patten. You can read his work at The Brass Wyrm, Filmalogical, /u/EtTuTortilla, /u/DylanTJefferson, and /u/OsoBrazos.

Congratulations to /u/Omnishruk, who won the nosleep eBook Cover Art Contest for this issue!

/u/AsForClass, /u/GoddessStyx, and /u/halfpastforever also submitted some superb work to the contest, which is used to separate the months from one another. You can see more of AsForClass's work on Facebook, tumblr, and Twitter.

Happy reading!

July 2014


JULY

I've Been Watching My Friends on Netflix

by nwf0165

Winner - July Monthly Contest

Part 1

My house has always been where all my friends hang out. I don't know what the appeal is, really, because it's pretty plain and normal. Some have said it's the 60 inch flat-screen TV everybody sits around, some say its my shitty kids air-hockey table, and some say its just the atmosphere, that it's "cozy". I don't get it, but that's the way it is.

But I don't want to make it sound like I have too many friends. My core group is about 7-8 people, including me, and since it's the summertime that number hovers closer to 3-4. I've hosted real parties before, but they're not so fun when you and your real friends have to clean up all that shit at obscene hours of the morning.

Well Friday is usually the day we all meet up at my house, and last night I invited over those friends of mine that weren't on vacation: let's call them Andy(Andrew), Sarah, and Debby. We just kinda talked for the first couple hours, about anything from AP scores, to colleges, to jobs...all that fun stuff. Luckily, the conversation soon turned to more laid-back joking and light relaxing. It was a really nice time after a while, really. At around 9 we all decided to watch a movie on Netflix. Thinking back on it now, this must have been where it started: Andy took the remote and told us about how good Mud was when he came across it on Netflix. Nothing really bizarre about that. Neither the girls nor I had seen it so we agreed to watch, and Andy put it on. All still good. We watched Mud, and it must have been a little over two hours because a little after 11 the credits roll. We all just talked about the movie for another ten minutes about the movie before Debby and Sarah get up and have to go. Andy and I said goodbye, and once they were gone Andy told me all about the things he'd do to Debby(he's been after her for years) if he could. I just laughed, kinda grossed-out all the way through it, but thinking about it now there was still nothing unusual about his behavior, or anything at all for that matter. So then Andy got up to leave around 11:30.

Now I was the only one awake in my house; my parents go to bed early, even on weekends, and my little sister is only six. Anyway, once Andy left I went upstairs to get a snack and some pepsi. I came back downstairs and sat back down on my recliner, and turned the TV back on, and it was still on Netflix as Andy had left it. I just remember being content in that moment, really fulfilled after that hang-out, and really relaxed. I was in one of those moods where you feel like you'll be happy forever, or at the very least you'll be able to recall that feeling forever.

I was wrong. I already can't recall that feeling.

Because when I decided to scroll through Netflix, I saw only one box under the "Recommended for you" section. One box. It was just black. There was no insignia, no logo, no title card. I didn't think anything of it at first. Then my eyes jumped to the title and description at the top of the screen. The

title was Andy. I laughed, and my first instinct was to call Andy right away and tell him about this new show; it didn't matter what it was about, in my mind at the time, the name alone was reason to call. That was until I read the description.

11 Gregson Street

Huh, my stupid brain thought. That's Andy's address.

I clicked on the box immediately. That circle in the center spun for far too long. Then it began to stream. What, I'm still not sure. The shot was completely silent, but it was in full color. The camera was also completely still. It was positioned like a security camera, up in the corner of the room. It was looking down into Andy's living room.

Andy was sitting on the couch on his phone. It looked like he was the only person awake, too. He was quite far away from the camera, but I could still make out when he chuckled at whatever he saw on his phone, even without the sound. He was sitting back, feet up on the coffee table, just relaxing. I received one of the strangest feelings ever from sitting there and watching him do nothing. I felt like I couldn't look away.

Then I thought about the situation. Andy, my best friend, is a computer programming master. At the thought my brain eased up for some reason. For a split second it seemed to me that he set this all up--maybe it was a mock-Netflix app he had made just for this elaborate prank on me. It was definitely something he was capable of, and hell if I know what goes into any of that stuff, so it was just as possible as anything to me...but why? My mind reentered reality and was coming up blank with any real reason for a prank like this. Giving up his privacy was a prank on me? Or was he gonna look into the camera any minute and say "boo"? I just didn't get it, and I couldn't look away.

I saw Andy stand up in the shot and start walking out of the room. This was gonna be the reveal, I just knew it. He won't just leave me watching this empty room all night. Andy left the room, and for a moment I did just watch the empty, dark living room...but in a moment the camera cut to his hallway. I watched Andy walk down the hall and into his bedroom. That was when I realized I was done. It was too late for this shit. I picked up my phone and called Andy.

I still kept an eye on my screen as the phone rang, and has he went into his room the camera cut again. This time it wasn't from up in a corner, but about waist-high, and off to the side of his room. I watched Andy clamber into bed from this direct angle, my panic rising which each second this show went on. Andy laid on his back for a minute, still scrolling on his phone, until I could tell my call came up. He gave his phone a weird look but answered anyway.

"Hello?" He said. I heard him through my phone's speaker as well as through the TV.

"Yeah, what's going on?" I asked.

"Uh, I just got home." He said. "Why?"

"Look to your right." I said.

I heard and saw Andy laugh. "What?"

"Just do it."

Andy narrowed his features and looked in the general direction of the camera. Not directly, though. He was looking slightly above it.

"Okay, I'm looking at my wall now. What's the catch?"

"What's on the floor?" I asked.

"What are you doing, man? You're kinda starting to creep me out."

"I..." I didn't know what to say. I had no clue where to start. If I came right out with it he'd just laugh. There's no right away to say it. There's no right place to start. I only stared at him as he looked generally toward the camera bemusedly.

"Alright man, I gotta wake up early tomorrow." He said. "Mess with me in the daylight. I'll see ya later. Bye."

My brain just seemed to stop working, and I just figured there was no way to keep him on the line. "Bye." I said. He hung up. I dropped my phone. I watched as the Andy on the screen laughed to himself, turned his phone off for the night and plugged it into his charger. Then I watched him draw his comforter over him and turn away from the camera, head on his pillow.

I just sat in awe for the twenty or so minutes, knowing nothing was gonna change, but at a complete loss in terms of what to do. Call the police? Call Netflix? I knew there would be no sleeping that night, even then, even before the camera moved.

The camera moved, and the complete stillness of the shot was broken after those twenty minutes. Someone was holding the camera. It was like someone picked it up. For a moment they just held it pointed toward Andy, and it shook like handheld camera footage will.

Then it moved forward. The shaky shot became gradually closer to the back of Andy's sleeping head. I was frozen. I was panicking. I remember pathetically grabbing for my phone and being unable to grasp it. Even if I had, Andy's phone was off. I had no idea what was about to happen, but the camera kept moving forward. Then I started to hear a sound. It was the only sound in the whole room--the whole house, for that matter. Whoever held the camera began to breath. Deep, raspy breaths. The closer he got, the louder and faster the breathing got. It was like the thought of being close to Andy excited him.

When the camera was about two feet from Andy it stopped, and just seemed to look down on his head, shaking mildly, the breathing still heavy from behind. My whole body was shaking. I couldn't even scream. That's when a hand reached down from behind the camera. It wore a red glove, but the fingers were extremely thin, and notably long.

The gloved hand came down upon Andy's head and stroked his hair gently.

That's when I jolted back into sanity. I shut Netflix right the fuck off--in fact I plugged my x-box out of the wall entirely. I grabbed my phone and called the police, not giving a fuck anymore whether I was gonna seem crazy or whatever. I gave them my name but Andy's address, and I told them I just thought something was seriously wrong and that my friend was in serious danger.

Then I sat fucking shaking in my recliner for about twenty minutes. I called Andy's phone and his house about 15 times each probably. Thirty minutes later, Andy called back. I was overwhelmed with relief to the point you couldn't imagine. I answered and it was his voice, and the relief grew, even though he was pissed the fuck off.

"Why the fuck did you call the cops?" Andy said right away. "Tell me what the fuck is going on right now, and tell meexactly what."

"What happened?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"What?" Andy said. "Yeah, I'm fucking okay. It's just that I'm about an hour asleep when I hear fucking cops banging on my front door. My sisters are bawling their fucking eyes out and the whole neighborhood is pretty much awake. And my mom and dad are up in the kitchen and don't even know where to start, kinda like me. They said that they were sent here by you, because you thought I was your friend was in danger? Tell me what the fuck is going on!"

"But you're okay?" I said, exhaling. I got a weird feeling then. I got the urge to plug my x-box back in. My mind was easing up, and I felt that maybe it was all just some kind of hallucination from exhaustion...basically, looking back now, my mind convinced itself that it was okay to turn Netflix back on again. The scariest part is that now I can't see the least bit of fucking logic in the decision.

"Jesus fucking christ." Andy went on in my ear. "If this was a joke then I hope you're happy, man. My whole family is fucked tonight, basically."

I turned the x-box back on, and Netflix resumed. My stomach sank. Andy was still under "Recommended for you."

"I'm sorry." I said. "I just had a bad feeling."

"That doesn't work." Andy said. "You tell me what the fuck is wrong."

He was right. It was just time to tell him. That's all that was left to be done.

"Andy," I said slowly. "Somebody is watching you. Someone's in your house."

There was a pause from the other line. I waited tensely and stared at the blank black box of Andy on my television screen.

"You know what, fuck you." Andy said after a minute. "Seriously man. You can't joke around with this shit. I'm hanging up and if you call me tomorrow you better not be high or drunk or whatever the fuck is wrong with you tonight. Fuck off."

That's when he hung up.

I felt like shit and was just as scared by then. I continued to stare at the box on my screen. I clicked on it, unable to prevent myself, knowing that I would regret it.

The film loaded again. When it started to play, I saw that the shot was shaky, still behind held, but that it wasn't moving. It was looking from one place, and although it was extremely dark I soon realized that the shot was no longer from inside.

There were twigs and leaves crowded around the side of the lens, and the breathing noise was now louder than ever. The camera was directed out toward the street, where I soon was able to make out two police cars pulled up on the curb--it was the curb right in front of Andy's house. As the camera filmed them the breathing became somewhat frantic, panicked. I realized where this was being filmed from, and as I did I went for the plug again. I was never turning this back on. It was done. I had to break the machine, I was certain. There were no other options.

It had been filming from the bushes on the side of Andy's house; the ones just below his bedroom window.

Then whatever was behind the camera made another sound.

Shhhhhhh

I stood rooted to the spot. The camera became shakier. The bushes around it became more apparent.

Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Then the screen froze. The shakiness of the camera stopped. Just like when a show or movie finished.

More recommendations appeared.

Their boxes were black, too.

The first one said Debby.

I grabbed the cord and yanked the plug from the outlet. The TV screen turned dark.

I didn't sleep last night. I've barely moved all day today. I don't know what to do with myself. I haven't called Andy yet today but I don't even know where to start. I know something is wrong, but I need some kind of help. I don't know if I can resort to the police again, and if so I don't know what to tell them. I just feel like there's nowhere to go to, and that I have no idea what kind of force I'm messing with. I used a throwaway for obvious reasons, and Andy and the rest know my usual reddit login. I know this community deals with this kind of thing so if anyone has any idea what my next step should be, please, please help.

Part 2

All of your advice was good, and I took a lot of it into account. After reading some I realized a lot of things I could've done differently, but luckily it wasn't too late in some respects. In many ways I have failed. I sit here typing this emotionlessly and numbly, unsure of where to begin or end.

This afternoon a big ass storm was coming and so I knew I better stop basically crying like a bitch and take some action. I built up the courage to turn Netflix back on, and believe it or not, Andy was still there under "Recommended for you." But it had company. Lined up next to it were at least three other black boxes, and I didn't bother looking to see who they were at that time. I didn't want to discourage myself any further.

My parents and Andy's aren't close so I guess they just threw last night away as a really inconsiderate prank. I would've told my parents and shown them everything but they left around noon for my sister's ballet recital, before I even posted the first part(which was way before a grew a pair). So I decided after reading all your comments to send Andy pictures from my phone of the stream. He was basically home all day, his parents not wanting to risk going out for this storm, and so I sent him a picture of him sitting on his couch, scrolling on his phone, and another of him in his kitchen eating a snack. I apologized between each image and made sure to make it sure it was clear these images of him were from my own TV. I told him that I meant what I said last night and that he needs to show his parents ASAP.

Do you think that's what he did?

Nope. I hear a knock on my door within a few minutes, and being home alone after last night made me shiver and go cold. I went to the door and found it was just Andy. Again, he was pissed, and he was also drenched. It was already pouring outside. I let him in.

"What the hell are you doing?" He asked me when he walked in. "How the hell did you get those pictures?"

"I swear to god this isn't a joke." I said. "Did you show your parents?"

"No." He said. "It's not fucking funny, it's just creepy. Tell me how you did it."

As soon as he said he didn't tell his parents I knew I had fucked up somewhere along the way.

"Jesus Christ, just come here." I said. I basically ran down to the basement and he followed, and in the back of my mind I knew what was going to happen--as soon as I tried to show Andy this stream is was going to be gone. In fact, the whole recommended for you section with my friend's streams would be entirely gone. I would just seem insane.

But that wasn't the case at all. Andy was still open in Netflix, as were the other black boxes. I was almost in disbelief, seeing the little box there with Andy right there next to me. I looked to him for a moment in awe, and then back to the screen.

"See?" I said, pointing to it. "You see that, right?" I waited for Andy to nod before I went on. "That right there is your whole life being streamed. Last night I watched it, and someone--something--was filming in every room of your house, everywhere you went. Do you think I'm still joking now? What would I even get from this? And I couldn't even fucking think last night I was so scared, and I just freaked and called the police to your house. You were alright but whoever this is was hiding in your bushes outside, and you should've told you fucking parents."

Andy looked like he couldn't speak. He was standing with his mouth slightly ajar.

"Click on it now." He muttered.

The reality dawned on me then.

I clicked and started the stream.

I saw Andy and myself through my basement window on the TV, the two of us staring dumbly at our own image. The loop went through my mind just as fear gripped my body and took the best of me again.

"Oh my fucking god," Andy said, looking up at the basement window. "I'm calling the fucking police. I'm calling them now."

Andy ended the stream and started dialing 911, somehow able to move, and I was able to break my gaze and look up to my basement window. Thunder blasted from outside. I watched as a figure scrambled up and ran away.

"Please please hurry." Andy said after giving the police our information, his voice shrill. He hung up the phone and we both stayed rooted to our spots in silence. Rain bucketed down on the house, and we could almost hear the wind through the walls.

"Fuck fuck fuck." Andy said. "I'm so fucking sorry. I should've told my parents. I didn't know what thi--"

There was a massive boom from outside. A transformer blew.

The power went out with a fizzle and a beep.

Andy and I saw each other only from the gray light the storm outside lent the basement. We looked each other in the eye. We had no idea what to do next, and the notion of just waiting seemed unbearable.

A massive crash sounded from above. It was the front door.

"Oh my god." Andy whispered. "Is that the cops?"

But I think he knew just as much as I did that it couldn't possibly be.

The sound of the rain on the house seemed to grow louder, just as I began to hear footsteps from the floor above. The house creaked gently with each step. The feet were crossing the living room.

It was going to find us.

I grabbed Andy in a moment of panic and ran into the laundry room, which was even darker than the den area of the basement. In fact the only light it got was the gray bar that came through the doorway from the den, and that kept the rest of the room in pitch blackness. Andy and I took advantage of this. We ran into the dank, cement-floored room and then made our way past the boiler and laundry baskets to the end of the room, where the washing machine and dryer were placed. We each squeezed behind; me behind the washing machine and Andy behind the dryer. We were basically pressed between the machines and the wall. All we could do then was stay completely still and listen.

For a moment it seemed like the footsteps from upstairs were over...until I heard one slam down on the top step.

"Oh fuck," I heard Andy mutter. He was basically crying. So was I.

The next step down was more gentle, but very much so audible. Whoever this was was taking their

time. I found myself squeezing my palms, trying to keep from just falling apart, which I felt would happen if I stopped trying so hard to keep it together.

Crrrrrrrrrrrrreeeeeeeeee

The steps creaked and settled as the cameraman took his steps down. I tried pushed my head out far enough to see between the machines, across the dark room to the doorway. I was able to see it; a gray rectangle, light falling through and onto the patch of cement below. Then an idea jumped into my mind, mostly thanks to the suggestions of a lot of you guys. I realized I had my phone on me, and if I had been able to think all those times fear gripped me, I could record whatever was about to happen. I took out my phone and started recording the empty doorway. I kept my eyes fixed and my phone as steady as possible, knowing that any minute...

A silhouette filled the doorway. The body was in the general shape of a person...but its fingers seemed longer and thinner, its hands wider. On the head there appeared to be some sort of strange hat, rounded at the top. A hat that seemed to jingle. And by the head of this creature, apparently on its face, was a single, blinking, red light.

"We're always watching." It said. It chuckled. "Always watching."

"Hey!" I heard a man's voice shout from upstairs. "Hey! Anybody in here?"

It was the police. I kept my eyes fixed on the figure in the doorway, unsure of whether or not it even saw us.

But of course it did. It seemed to click in my mind then: It always saw. They always saw.

I realized, as whatever it was stood still in the doorway, what that small red light by its head was. It was the red “record” light coming from a camera. A camera pointed right toward me. We were filming each other. The thing in the doorway seemed to recoil when it realized. It cringed back and stepped out of sight.

"We're here!" Andy yelled. I would've told him to shut up, but the cameraman was gone from the doorway almost immediately after it had appeared.

We got out from behind the machines and ran out of the laundry room. We ran up the stairs and met the police halfway across the living room. The two cops were soaked with rain and were looking at the two of us, seemingly at a loss.

"You two okay?" The first one said.

"No," I said. I looked past the officer toward the front door. There was no front door. It was on the floor below the doorway. Rain and cold wind blew into the house. I just sat, essentially fell, to the floor. Over the next hour Andy and I told the cop everything, and showed him the pictures from the stream. Then I showed him the video I just took. He scrutinized the dim footage and made a few faces, but made no real comments of worth at that moment. The guy was cool and didn't just think we were crazy--and he could tell someone had broken in based on the job done on the door. He knew the power was out and we couldn't show him, but he said that there was power at the police station and would be glad to bring us there with my x-box and let us log on and show them. He said he didn't understand what might be happening, or how this guy has seemingly hacked into my system, but that it was surely nothing to do with the company itself and that calling them would resolve nothing. He said if this really were all true(I really give him props for even trying to believe a story that I know must sound just ridiculous) that we could stream this at the station and dispatch officers to the apparent

location of the cameraman. Then they would get him and resolve this all themselves...figure out exactly who's doing it and how.

We went with the officer to the station, and I brought along my x-box. Andy and I were too afraid to speak in the car, and by the time we got to the station (around 6) we didn't feel relieved by any measure. The storm just got more violent, it seemed. The cops in the front seat of the car kept describing it through a slew of obscenities. I didn't even understand how they were driving under those conditions, as the rain was flooding the windshield much faster than the wipers could hope to clear. Eventually they pulled into the station and we all rushed inside. I was hypersensitive and seemed to notice everything from when we walked into the station, through a couple halls and into a kind of meeting room with a big TV on the wall.

It took me a few minutes to hook up the x-box, but once I did I was almost sure that Andy and the rest would be gone. Like some of your comments said, I felt like whatever force runs these streams would know who to show them to.

But I was wrong again. The streams were all there…all besides Andy. It wasn't the first suggestion as usual.

Dad was.

"This is it." I said. The two officers who had brought me gathered around the TV and watched silently.

I clicked on Dad, a knot tightening in my stomach. Seeing that went against everything I had expected.

I found myself watching a shot from the back of my family's minivan on the TV screen. They were driving through the storm. My dad driving, my mom in the passenger's seat, and my sister in the back.

"Well, I'll be damned." One cop said. "Just look at that."

"Is that your dad, kid?" The other cop asked.

"Yes." I croaked.

"And where would they be driving, if this is right now?"

"On Route 5." I said. "Home from my sister's ballet."

"Then we're off." The first cop said. "C'mon, let's go. You two stay here, and don't you move. The bastard's in the car, somehow. The idiot trapped himself."

"You two are safe here." The other officer said. "It's a building full of police. We'll make sure they're all aware of the situation."

I just nodded until the two officers left Andy and I alone in the room. Andy and I still just said nothing to each other, and continued to watch the stream. Nothing was happening. They just continued to drive straight on the highway, my dad apparently under some pressure to see, craning his neck to look out the window and turning to make comments to my mother.

It went on like that for about ten minutes, until we began to hear sirens from the TV. That was when the same red, gloved, spidery hand reached out from behind the camera and gently stroked my sister's hair.

"Oh, crap!" I heard my dad say. "How can they even see us in this?" My sister turned toward the camera.

She let out the most terrifying scream I have ever heard. Her eyes filled with utter horror. The hand placed itself over her mouth. I heard a breathy laugh from the cameraman.

I saw my dad turn around instinctively at her scream. I saw his eyes widen. I heard the blare of a horn. The screeching slam of brakes. The metallic smash of two automobiles. A man, woman, and girl's scream.

Then the stream ended.

My father's show was over.

More recommendations appeared.

I screamed and fell to the ground. My entire body was shaking, and Andy was staring at me with his eyes as wide as my sister's.

The next few hours were a blur. I was told my father had been killed in the accident. My sister and mother are in critical condition at the hospital. Both officers also critical. Reality seemed to be lost on me. Andy opted to stay at the station with me the entire time. The sound of rain on the building quieted. The storm must have ended. It was something I could barely notice. I mostly heard a faint ringing--I still do.

The rest of my friends came to the police station at Andy's request and also at essentially a mandate of the officers after Andy claimed their names were on the Netflix recommendations. But the x-box just stopped working soon enough, so they didn't know what was going on, nor could they watch any of the streams or have any reason to believe in them other than from my pictures...but it seems that they had gotten the idea that there was a real danger in this. I don't know what Andy filled them in on, or whether he was able to fill them in on anything, as I was utterly unable. I couldn't even speak. I still can't. Either way, the police left the x-box hooked up in that conference room. They said they were gonna do all they could to get it back working and that they are concentrating all of their efforts on finding "this guy."

"This guy."

Debby and Sarah showed up around nine and the two of them and Andy just stuck with me in a different, more comfortable room for quite a long time. None of us spoke, the three of them completely unsure of what was okay to say around me. I didn't care. I felt completely numb.

I went home with Andy at around one in the morning (his family said they'd take me in for the time being). They stopped by my house and let me gather my things, most importantly my laptop. Now it's 2. I still only feel numb. I'm glad that the x-box has been taken away. I don't care about it. I don't care about anything. I'm starting to feel that there's nothing I nor any police can do about this. I'm being played with by a force that can do whatever it wants, and my life is completely in its hands. What is there to do?

UPDATE: Morning of 7/13/14

I couldn’t post this last night as soon as I would’ve liked, and quite a bit has happened since then.

Andy and I didn’t talk much at all last night. I slept in the guest bedroom and he stuck to his own room. But at around three AM, he came in to check on me. He said that he couldn't sleep, and he knew that I couldn't either. He sat down at the foot of my bed and we talked, finally. He carefully avoided bringing up my dad, and I'm pretty grateful for that even though I felt pretty much numb to everything.

He said that he doubts the police are going to be able to doing anything, and I told him how I agree. He also said that we have to man up.

I was honestly quite surprised with him, there. Not mad, but just taken aback. Andy is the last person in line to man up.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"If we don't think the police can do anything, let's ask ourselves why."

"Okay."

"So why can't they?" He asked me.

I thought about it.

"Because whoever this is is in control." I said. It was the first thing that came to mind. "And he's not interested in them."

"He's after us." Andy said, nodding. "So it's like we're the ones he wants to watch, but we're also the ones he wants to show."

"Yeah," I said. "And that doesn't make me feel any better."

"It doesn't have to." Andy said. "It just means we should try to fucking do something. If we can see who's gonna get hurt, we can also try to stop it. We can use this for good, right?"

Man up made sense to me then.

"Why did he go away when the police came in?" I asked. "The person in the video."

"I dunno" Andy said.

"What was he worried about?" I asked.

"Fuck if I even know what's going on at all." Andy said. "What I'm getting to is we need to open up all these streams. We need to be watching. Get what I'm saying? It's the only way I can think we can keep people safe. We need to stop worrying about ourselves."

"I know." I said. Andy was right. "But Andy," I said. "I think he--it--didn't like that I was recording it."

"Really?"

"It didn't stand to long in the doorway." I said. "It was like it realized it was on camera."

Andy didn't say anything and just seemed to look away in thought.

"It's a good idea." He said. "Maybe you're right." He paused. "But forget theory right now, seriously. What other devices can we get onto Netflix through?"

"My phone." I said. "Your phone. My laptop. Your x-box. Your desktop."

Andy didn't waste a minute. He got up and told me to follow him. I logged onto my netflix through his x-box, we both logged on through the app on our phones, and I logged in through my laptop. Still, as present as ever, were the black boxes under "Recommended for you."

Andy scrolled through them.

"Debby, Sarah, Andy..." He said. Then he gulped. I saw on the screen that the next two boxes were "Mom" and "Jane" (my sister). Andy couldn't bring himself to say so in front of me.

"Open Andy first." I said shakily.

He was already going to do so. I was expecting to lose my air again, expecting to experience the surreal loop-like view of myself and Andy watching ourselves...but that wasn't the case. I can't tell if what was on the screen was better or worse.

The camera was just pointed at a sign. The camera was shaking. The sign was one I had seen several times throughout my life, but the field of view of the shot wasn't wide enough for me to see where the sign being filmed might be.

The sign had a video camera in one of those red circles with the line through it. It read: No Audio/Video recording without express permission.

The shot became momentarily shakier still until the stream ended. The other recommendations appeared.

Andy and I just looked at each other. We didn't know what to take from that, except maybe that this cameraman had a sense of humor. Andy almost immediately clicked on Debby next.

Debby was fast asleep in her bed. The shot was totally still.

"Open Sarah's stream on your laptop." Andy whispered.

I did so, and soon found myself just looking at another still shot of Sarah in her bed, clearly fast asleep. Nobody was holding this camera, and it was clear that it was placed somewhere.

We sat watching these still shots for another half hour. I decided then to check my mom's.

A shot of her sleeping in a hospital bed. Again, totally still.

I checked my sister's. The same. Totally still. Tears filled my eyes as I looked at her. It kind of all hit me then. I didn't know why this had all started, if there even was a reason, and I didn't know why she had been affected.

Soon enough Andy and I fell asleep. I don't remember falling asleep, obviously, but I do remember dreaming. At least, I hope I had been dreaming.

In the dream I woke up and looked at my laptop's screen that I had left open before me. I didn't see the recommended for you section with the black boxes, but instead I remember seeing "Because you watched Dad."

Dad was the only black box beneath this heading.

I clicked it and the stream showed only blackness. It seemed to just be nothing for a while...until I heard a crack of wicked laughter, and a loud fleshy thump. These thumps continued, and followed by each was a chilling scream. The laughter became more maniacal as the thumps went on.

I heard my father's voice yell, "Please."

The stream ended. I don't remember falling asleep again. I woke up around nine AM in Andy's room, laptop still open to Netflix. My eyes were rubbed red. I can't find "Because you watched" anywhere.

I'm not sure what's going to happen today. It's almost like there's no point in asking for more help. I feel like my life has been ruined within two days. Should I just go along with Andy? Is Andy even right or is it all just bullshit? I don't know what to think. And the longer I'm awake, the more I'm convinced that my "dream" was nothing of the sort.

UPDATE

The video is about ten seconds long and everything in it is essentially inaudible and due to the

darkness pretty much just all black. The only useful thing that I or the police got from it was the cameraman, on camera. Because the room was so dark we can only see his shape against the dim light of the doorway, like in this screen shot, and you can see the tiny red "record" light. Andy and I have both pretty much abandoned the video--we can't see much use in it. Do with that what you will.

Part 3

My Dad was my role model. He was born in Scotland in 1961. He grew up in a dirt-poor household, with 5 siblings crammed into one bedroom. His family worked their little farm and did all they could to make ends meet. His mother died of cancer when he was 10. He and his father worked together to support the still-huge family, and I can't imagine things altered too dramatically around the house with his two sisters, and I don't know how close he was to his mom...but I still don't really know what it was like for him to experience a death like that so early in his life. When he was 14, his father died. His uncle had to come and work with my father to support the family. They did so together until my dad was old enough to leave. My dad met my mom at a wedding in Scotland. She was there for one of her Scottish cousins, but had been living right in my very hometown in the US. When my dad's uncle died, he got all of that farm land they had worked when my dad was a teen...around 28 acres. They came back together and they started a life here...maybe not a rags to riches story but fuck if he wasn't better off these days than he was when he lived in a barn. My dad wasn't a genius, but he was one of the funniest and most caring people I've ever come across, and I knew it was because of what he went through.

Now he's gone.

It hadn't hit me until later that morning. I had been in shock up until that point. And for a time, before Andy had woken up, I felt like I couldn't move. And that dream I had I didn't think much into--I still felt it was really just a dream.

But then the anger came. It seemed to slap me into action. Why was I the one this was happening to? Why me? I realized I needed to stop with that. My father probably asked himself the same question when he was a kid...but then he went and did something about it. I got out of my sleeping bag on the floor and pulled Andy off his bed.

"The fuck?" Andy mumbled.

"Get up." I said. "Look at the TV."

Andy groggily turned his head toward the TV, where Debby's stream was still playing. She was still asleep in her bed.

I checked Sarah's on my laptop...still asleep.

"We're calling the police, and we're showing them these streams." I said. "Maybe they can't do anything about the broken xBox but they can see these. Stay at our house if they need to."

"Okay," Andy said sleepily. "Yeah, solid."

"But we keep our phones." I said.

Andy gave me a look. "Okay. Why?"

"In case you're right." I said. "And it's our problem."

So I called the police. They said they'd be over as soon as possible. We waited by looking at our streams. At around 9:30 am Debby got out of bed.

"She's getting changed, turn around." Andy said.

"Are you turning around?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Andy said. "Why would I miss this?"

"Dude, stop that." I said. "Turn it off."

"Holy shit." He said. "Look at that."

I couldn't stop from looking at the screen. Debby was down to her underwear, her body turned in the opposite direction of the camera.

She began to pull down her underpants.

I felt a rush of hormones, but it was overridden by a powerful guilt: Debby was our friend. If she knew about this, I couldn't even imagine the humiliation. This was wrong.

I grabbed the controller from Andy and backed out of the stream. "What the fuck?" Andy said. "I was just getting a boner!"

"Just fucking think about this. That thing is in her house." I said. "There is something watching her, and all of us. This isn't just peeping through the window at the fucking girl next-door or some shit. This is fucking feeding into it."

The anger left Andy's face. He looked down. "You're right." He said. "Fuck, you're right. I just haven't been awake long enough to think."

I said nothing and looked back at the black boxes on the screen. Debby was not first. I did a double take at the new box.

Officer Platt.

Andy seemed to notice too. "What the hell?"

I clicked on it.

It was being filmed from the back seat of a police car. It was shaky, but the shot was clearly on the officer driving. I assume this was "Platt." I also couldn't see an officer in the passenger's seat; Platt must have been responding alone. My last assumption was that it was my call he was responding to. Initially I wanted to scream "turn around!", and wondered how he could not notice the cameraman sitting right behind him.

Then I looked into the rear-view mirror. I noticed Platt's eyes shooting up into it and then back to the road. Then I noticed the tense and overly-rigid way he gripped the wheel. Then I noticed how calm the breathing of the camerman was.

"I control." I heard the Cameraman say.

"Yes, yes." Platt forced himself to say, nodding. "Of course."

"Pull over car." Cameraman said. "Hungry."

"Sure." Platt said. The Cameraman then directed the shot to look ahead out of the windshield. It was a long stretch of road that I recognized immediately as Greering Way. You had to follow it onto Route 5 to get to my side of town. The thing about Greering Way was that it always had very little traffic, being somewhat of a back-road. There were also no stops.

Platt pulled off on the grassy side of the road.

"Call for backup, you fuckwit." Andy whispered, his voice choked up.

Platt sat in the driver's seat, staring ahead. His eyes flickered up into the rear-view mirror and away again. He didn't know what to do with himself.

"Get out car." The Cameraman said. Platt nodded, clicked open his door and stepped out.

The Cameraman got out hastily, careful not to get any of itself in the shot.

"No call more." Cameraman said. "Nobody hear you here."

Platt cringed away from the sight of the Cameraman. He kept his eyes on the ground.

"What is it you want?" Platt said, trying to sound as calm and friendly as possible--but I heard the cracks in his voice.

"I want show." The Cameraman said.

There was a wet, tearing sound from behind the camera.

"Oh god." The officer said, stepping back. "Why are you doing this?"

"I must." Cameraman said. "Made mistake." It made a sound that I wasn't sure was even speech. "Very hungry."

"What do you want to show me?" Platt said. He still kept his eyes away. He looked like he was about to break. The terror that seized him was palpable.

"Not you." The Cameraman said. "You are just food."

"W--what do you mean?" Platt said, taking another few steps backward.

"All is my joke." The Cameraman said. "And all is watched."

The Cameraman began to advance slowly. The officer jerked his head upward. They were now about 5 yards apart.

The officer unlatched his holster and pulled out his 9 mm. He swiftly pointed it, seemingly right at the camera.

Then the camera was dropped. The officer fired as the camera fell to the ground. The camera landed in the grass and rolled for a moment. Then it stopped. The shot was directed away from the officer, toward the woods off the road. It was completely still. This all happened in the blink of an eye, and the gunshot still rang out.

The camera had been dropped before the officer had fired.

There was a massive crack of bone. The officer yowled intensely with pain off-camera. There was a snap and the sound of crushed flesh. There were the wet smacking noises mixed with the agonized, tortured screams, all while Andy and I stared at the still shot of grass and woods.

The stream ended.

I looked to Andy. His eyes were the widest I had ever seen them. "Fuck." He said. "Jesus fucking Christ."

Panic set into us both. We didn't stop to discuss what we both saw; we both knew. It was time to get going.

I backed out of the stream. Andy was the first again. I clicked on quickly.

I saw Andy and myself from behind on the TV and a spike of panic jolted my spine...but the camera was completely still, and up, higher above us.

Andy was already turned around and looking by the time I was.

"Look for the cameras." I said. "I'm inviting over Debby and Sarah."

"Check Sarah's stream." Andy said, continuing his search for cameras.

I did so. I went back to my laptop and saw that Sarah was still in bed, but she was awake and on her phone. I checked and believe the time then was 10 or very close to it.

For my own comfort, I checked my mom and sister's stream. They were still in the hospital. I sighed, relieved. I then noticed The Officer Platt stream was gone. I did a double check for Dad. I didn't find a thing. I was worried then I was only wasting time.

I told Debby and Sarah to come over right away, as Andy went through his bedroom to try to find the cameras. He then left the room and searched the areas of the house I had told him I saw him in. As I called both Debby and Sarah, I told them to bring any cameras they could, and especially their phones...and then I got a strange idea. Would it be safe for them to come? That officer didn't make it, it was sure. The last thing the Cameraman seemed to want was even the beginning of an upper-hand on our side. It wasn't going to let us get together, was it?

I control. It had said.

But what did it not like? It told us itself; No Audio/Video recording without express permission.

"Keep your phone recording your entire ride over." I said to both Debby and Sarah when I called them, respectively. "Start now. No, I'm not joking."

Debby went along with it, confused, but Sarah had been stubborn. She wanted me to explain right over the phone. So I had to play it rough:

"You could go the way of my dad if you don't."

It hurt to say it...but it had worked. Sarah was on her way, camera phone recording.

Andy came back into the room and had found no cameras anywhere throughout his house, even following his own stream through the app on his phone. The stationary cameras seemed to just not exist. He was at a loss.

We turned our attention to Sarah and Debby's streams on their way over. Both held their phones, recording nothing in particular. I told Andy about my idea, and he clapped me on the back. It appeared to be working.

Sarah and Debby both got over to Andy's house without a hitch. Once they came inside we said they could stop recording. They were equally as confused, and Sarah being the more prissy one was quite pissed.

We basically had to explain everything to them. We brought them into Andy's room and showed them the streams. We explained to them that we were all affected for apparently no reason. We were all being watched. We told them about yesterday, the figure in the doorway. We showed them that screenshot, and we told them about what we saw before my family's car accident. I told them about the hand. I told them about Friday night; how it all started after they left. We told them about this morning. We told them about Officer Platt. (All we left out was Debby's changing of clothes this morning).

Both of them were entirely shocked, obviously. Sarah thought we were just messing with her for quite a while, but after showing more of the streams, especially ones in the hospital, she began to accept it. She was rejecting the supernatural, too. She was convinced this was a human, just a very sick and demented one. That was kind of until I explained what we saw in the Platt stream. The sounds and screams and mysterious dropping of the camera. She remained a skeptic. She didn't understand why

we all seemed to be targets, but also was right in noting that until we're safe, that doesn't matter. Debby was just super quiet. She's usually extremely laid-back, so the tension and anxiety she started to show was so out of character to me.

"Have you checked everywhere for these cameras?" Sarah said.

"Yes." I said.

"We can't find any, anywhere." Andy said. "Not in my house, at least."

"And now we think the police can't do anything?" Sarah asked. "Are we sure about that?"

"I mean..." I said. "I don't know what else we tell them. They must know Platt is missing, but...calling another over will just let it happen again."

"So, this thing," Sarah said. "It's stopping them from doing anything? From helping?"

"That's what it looks like." Andy said.

"Jesus..." Debby said.

Sarah went over to the xbox and grabbed the controller. She clicked on her own name.

"Look at that." She said.

We were all looking at a shot of the four of us, all from the same stationary spot up on the back wall. Sarah turned around to where there should have been a camera.

"There's no camera." She said.

"Yeah." Andy said. "It doesn't make any sense."

Sarah went from her stream to Andy. Same exact still shot. She went from Andy to Debby. The same shot was being used for all of them. Then she seemed something that was so obvious, but somehow I had looked over: "Where's your name, nwf0165?"

She looked at me.

"Oh, yeah." Andy said. "Never even realized."

I paused, thinking.

"It's my account." I said. "I guess I can only watch others from here."

"That kinda implies this works for everyone." Sarah said. "That everyone can watch others. Doesn't it?"

"Eh..." Andy said. "I checked my own account. None of this shit is going on for me."

Sarah looked away, disappointed. "Hmm..." She said.

"Check his mom's." Debby suddenly said. "Check the ones we aren't in."

Sarah switched on Mom.

The camera was still. I saw my mother in her hospital bed. Nurses were tending to her. I looked closely, trying to make out anything my mom might be saying, hoping she was speaking at all.

"It's still." Sarah said. "Checking your sister's now."

She went to Jane.

The camera was shaking again. It was handheld, directed at my sister, asleep in her hospital bed, in the rather dimly lit room.

All four of us were frozen, watching. The Cameraman walked around my sister's bed, not really doing anything but filming her from different angles. He didn't get closer or farther from her. He just filmed...but I knew by now that it was only a matter of time until he did more than that.

"We have to stop fucking waiting." I said. "We have to go to the hospital."

"Turn it off." Andy said, getting up and leaving the room to get one of his parents. "C'mon, all of you. Bring your phones. Shut that xbox off."

"I'm calling the police again." I said.

"They won't be able to do anything." Andy said.

"I know." I said. "I just need to get that thing out of my sister's room."

My three friends looked at me like I was crazy. I did feel crazy. It was a selfish decision. I knew that. But I also knew that I didn't want my sister to die.

"I'll tell them to bring back up." I said.

Andy held eye contact with me, and I felt he understood my choice then. The other two said nothing and followed him out of the room to find his mother(our ride to the hospital).

I called the police. I told them to respond to the hospital my mom and sister were being kept in. I told them it was urgent and backup was needed. I didn't even know if this was something you could say to police, so I hung up right after I said it. Then I left the room to find the others.

I went into Andy's garage and found my friends and Andy's mom standing and staring at the car. Andy's mom looked dumbfounded. Andy eyed me with a look that said: of course.

I looked at the car. I noticed that something was wrong with it right away. It was lopsided. The front-right wheel was completely gone.

"I'm sorry, guys." Andy's mom said. She walked over to me and gave me a hug. She squeezed tightly. "I'm so sorry." She whispered. It was probably about the fourth time she's said it to me like that.

"It's really okay," I lied. How were we going to get to the hospital now? Call a taxi?

Andy's mom released me and walked back off into the house. As soon as she did, Andy walked over to the other side of the garage. Over to the bikes.

"We're doing this the hard way." He said. "I only have three bikes."

I walked over with Debby and Sarah to where he stood.

"Two decent ones, both mountain bikes..." Andy said. "And one shitty little bmx bike from when I was a shitty little kid."

"I can take the bmx." I said.

"I'm getting my own bike." Sarah said. "I'm not sharing."

"So Debby and I are on one." Andy said. "Are we all happy with this?"

"I'm happy." Sarah said.

Debby grinned through her nervousness at Andy. Andy probably shit his pants a little bit.

Andy led to the basement before we left.

"Grab one of the flashlights on the shelf, here." He said, pointing to his dad's. "It doesn't make sense now but later you might need it. Now for weapons..."

We all got a flashlight.

Andy looked around the musty basement. Something caught his eye. He walked over to another shelf and picked it up. "My dad has a few fishing knives, here. They're all foldable. Pretty big. Any takers?" Andy put one of them in his draw-string bag.

"Yeah, I'll take one." Debby said, surprisingly.

Sarah and I both took knives, too.

"We're probably not gonna be able to stab this thing, but..." Andy said, looking harder around the basement. After a while we dug up two baseball bats(aluminum and wooden), a crowbar, and a couple metal bars. He left them in a pile before us.

"Pretty much all useless, i'd say." Andy said.

We all agreed and left it. It seemed odd that Andy had spent so much time rummaging through his basement knowing that nothing he could find would be of much use. I didn't think much of it then.

We got ready. Andy opened the garage door, and ironically it was a beautiful summers day. The sun was bright, everything had that twinge of gold, and the air was just fresh. Andy got both mountain bikes and taped the camcorder Debby brought to the front of his. He turned it on and began recording right away. He told Sarah to do the same for her bike. She had just brought a standard camera, but it did have video recording capabilities. She found it a struggle but eventually taped it to the front.

He gave Debby his phone and told her to keep it recording behind them and to their sides. She agreed.

Andy didn't give me any orders. I taped no cameras to my bmx and only had my phone to record with...but as we left the garage I didn't record on my phone; I opened up my sister's stream on the Netflix app.

The camera was still for the time being. It was out of her room.

And then we were off, Andy leading the way with Debby sharing the seat and holding on to him, Sarah behind him, and me taking up the rear.

We rode urgently through the heat. It was tough, but we were doing it. I kept an eye on my sister's stream the entire ride, sitting down(I stand on my pedals as I ride) and taking my phone out of my pocket. The entire time the shot of my sister in the hospital was still.

I wonder if it knew we were coming. It must. It's always watching. Why can't it stop us? Is it really the cameras? My stomach sank: what if it's too busy with the cops?

Then I thought to check another stream. Andy.

The camera was not still.

It was running along with us. Off to the side of the road.

I jerked my head to look in that direction--the side we were being filmed through was all forest. I almost fell off my bike, then, when I saw the shape bounding along pretty deep into the woods, keeping up with the speed of our bikes. I squinted, trying to get a good look at the thing--and though it was too blurry and fast to make out anything of real importance, I did see a streak of blue. Then I snapped out of my near-trance.

"Debby, point the camera toward the woods!" I shouted to them up ahead.

She did so without hesitation. I looked down at the stream. I heard the creature make a gutteral noise,

and then the camera turned from us. The stream ended.

"What was it?" Andy shouted back to me.

It wasn't worth explaining through shouts. "Nothing!" I yelled back.

It took us about thirty minutes of riding to get to the hospital, by which point my heart was hammering. We ditched our bikes in a hidden patch of grass behind the parking garage and ran in. I led this time.

We were directed to the third floor by the lady at the front desk. I snatched my visitors pass and basically bolted for the elevator.

There were cones around it. An out of order sign.

I should've known better than to use it, anyway. If it wants to stop us, that's where it'll do it.

I led my friends to the staircase and shot up them as fast as I could to floor three. We busted out onto my sister's floor and I took a look up and down the floor. It seemed pretty empty.

"Debby and Sarah, go stay in my mom's room." I said. "Andy and I will go to my sister." I hesitated. "Keep your cameras up."

Andy and I ran down the hall to my sister's room, cell phone cameras recording, and pushed open the door.

"Oh, my!" A nurse yelled at the sight of us.

I looked to my sister. She was still asleep in her bed.

"Oh, christ..." I said. "Oh, thank fucking christ."

I nearly fell to my knees and cried like a bitch, then. If only for the nurse's concerned look, and the fact that we weren't done.

"Have the police shown up yet?" I asked.

"What?" The nurse asked. "Police?"

"Oh god." I said, looking to Andy.

That's when I really wanted to die.

"Can we get this patient moved to another room?" I asked. "It's urgent. The police will be here any minute."

"I'm afraid I can't just do that." The nurse said. "I don't know who you two are."

"Okay, whatever." I said. "Just stay here, please. Don't leave this room."

Andy and I left quickly.

"What do you think happened to the cops?" Andy asked timidly.

"What the fuck do you think?"

He just eyed me angrily. Then he told me to stop for a second.

I did stop. He took a gun out of his pocket. A little snub-nosed revolver.

"It's my dad's." Andy said. "He brings it when we go fishing in the middle of nowhere. Got it from the basement."

I stared at it. "You fuckin idiot." I whispered to him. "It's genius, but you're still an idiot. Don't you dare take that out in here unless you see the thing and you have the clearest shot anybody's ever had."

Andy nodded and understood. He stowed the gun away again. We picked up our pace and got to my mom's room on the same floor.

My mother was still in her bed, apparently sleeping as well. Debby and Sarah stood alone in there, their cameras in their hands and recording but pointed at nothing.

"What's going on?" Debby whispered as we walked in.

"Cops haven't shown up, yet." I said. "Come here and let's look at the streams."

I opened up Jane on my phone.

As I did, the lights above flickered.

Looking at the stream, the camera was still, and the nurse was still tending to my sister.

The lights above flickered again.

I turned to the window to double check myself on the fact that it was a flawless day weather-wise.

I looked back to the stream.

"Check one of ours." Sarah said. I clicked on Andy.

We were all contained in a wide shot from the top left corner of this hospital room. Mom, Sarah, Debby.

All the same shot.

Every shot was still.

Where is it?

There was an explosive noise from a floor below. The lights went out completely.

Darkness, countered only by the little golden light spilling in from the window, filled the hospital room.

Now, around the time this was happening, I learned later on, a police officer we'll call Dan Farley was waking up, half-dazed, from a freak accident that had occurred while he was responding to a call--my call. He said he woke up among wreckage--both his car and the other squad car that had followed him were totaled, looked like they had been thrown off the road. But there was a squad car that looked fine, just pulled off the road, a few dozen yards ahead of the wreck. Of course I know this to be Platt's--but these officers would've had no idea. They had been coming from the other side of town, from the police station. They had been going down Greering Way. The four officers that had been on the "urgent call" with him had all been killed.

At the same time the power went out, Officer and survivor Dan Farley began to stumble toward the intact squad car down the road.

"It took out the power." Andy said.

I hurriedly clicked back on Jane.

The camera was not still. The breathing was frantic.

The red hand was grabbing my sister's legs through the blanket. It tugged her forward until she fell onto the bed. It seemed to hoist her up over its shoulder. I saw her legs in the frame.

It bounded out of the door and was off.

I was jolted into action before anybody could speak. I told Andy to get his phone out and start

recording again. I gave Sarah and Debby a stranger request--I told them not to follow me, but to look through these hospital rooms and findmirrors. I don't know if they understood where I was going with this, but it didn't matter. They were scared enough to go along with it. One of them to stay with my mom, the other to go searching. I'd call with what I wanted them to do next. I must've seemed sure of myself, despite being just as afraid.

Andy and I rushed out my mom's hospital room. The halls were pretty dark, although the light from the windows at either end was quite enough to give us a good idea of where we were going. We got the flashlights out anyway. I looked down to where my sister's room was. Nobody was in the hall. It was gone.

We ran down to my sister's room and shined our flashlights inside. Her sheets were rustled. Like I expected and feared, she really wasn't there.

We didn't have to talk, and ran for the staircase. I looked at my sister's stream, but it was fairly useless; The Cameraman was running, rushing, and it just appeared to be a messy blur. I couldn't see where he was going.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"I don't know." Andy breathed. "But it's not leaving the hospital."

"How do you know?"

"It knocked off the power." Andy said. "And we're all in here. It has nobody else to film."

It seemed to make sense, but I was wary to treat the subject too logically. My conception of what this thing is capable of has only changed since the start.

We ran down the dark staircase, headed to nowhere in particular. I looked back down to the stream again.

It wasn't just a messy blur of motion anymore.

It was just black. Black, and as far as I could tell, still.

"Hold up a sec." I said. "Look at this."

I showed him the dark screen. We both listened to the breathing coming from behind. It was calming down.

"The basement." Ade said firmly.

I turned the netflix app off, and put my camera on. I started to record. We continued down the steps, holding our phones up.

"Check our stream." Andy said. "Well, mine."

"Really?" I asked. "I just turned on my camera."

"Just do it." Andy said. "I have a nasty feeling. What was all that mirror stuff about, anyway?"

I turned on Andy's stream.

The camera was above us. Up the flights of stairs. It wasn't steady. It looked down through the long, square fall between the flights. Just then the Cameraman jumped down.

"Go!" I screamed.

Andy jerked his head over to me in a panic. "What?"

I pulled him to the closest doorway--the first floor, not the basement. I heard the Cameraman crash behind us. I lost grip with Andy's hand. He was pulled back.

"Oh, fuck!" I heard him yell. I spun around.

"Run upstairs!" I bellowed. I don't know whether or not he heard me, but I ran toward the doorway. I remembered Andy's stream was right in the palm of my hand.

Officer Dan Farley was now pulling up at the hospital. I imagine he couldn't think...the injuries he had sustained from the crash earlier which I later read about lead me to wonder how he even got up at all. Farley got out of Platt's squad car and walked to the front doors. Much of the staff was in the lobby...he found out the power was out, their generators were failing, and they were all in a frenzy to restore it. They must have all been shocked to see Farley--he looked like he had been hit by a battering ram. But when a nurse approached the young cop frantically about a certain patient being missing from floor 3...Farley must have been as ready as ever.

I looked at my stream of Andy.

It didn't have him. He was standing in front of it, holding his phone up right into its lens, backing slowly up the stairs.

It didn't seem like he could look straight at the thing. His eyes were squinted, and although it seems quite clear he should've screamed for me, it was quite obvious he couldn't bring himself to. If anything he was going to vomit.

Andy said nothing, but managed to keep his phone held up, his flashlight pointed right at it, and ascend the staircase.

I called Sarah. They had found four of those big, person-sized, wheeled mirrors. I told her she needed to put one at either end of the third floor, and she needed to do it as fast as she could. I also told her that this was it.

I turned on her stream. The still cameras documented her placing of the mirrors on either end. I checked Debby. She sat in the room with my mom, phone facing the door.

I thought about using the staircase on the other end...but I went for Andy's staircase.

I looked upward between it, and heard Andy's footsteps still ascending. I turned my camera on my phone. I started to record. Then I started to run upwards.

"It's gone!" I heard Andy yell from above. "Maybe it realized it was fucked!"

Then he screamed. I heard a door slam shut.

I ran to the third floor staircase. I don't know what I expected to see, but it wasn't nothing. I looked through the windows of the door. Debby and Sarah must both be in my mom's room, like where I told them to stay. Both mirrors were placed where I wanted them to be.

Then I looked to the floor. I saw Andy. I saw blood pooled at the back of his shirt. But he was moving.

I broke through the doors.

"Are you okay?" I said, shaking Andy.

"Yes...'M good." He mumbled.

I closed my camera on my phone and opened Netflix. I looked at the stream of Andy. A still

shot. Debby. Still.Sarah. Still. Mom. Still. Jane. Complete darkness, but there was no frantic or calm breathing. But there was an extra stream.

Officer Farley. I hit it.

The doors on the other end of the hospital wing opened. A man stumbled through. I looked to my phone. The shot wasn't still. I looked back up, and there it stood.

It was in the center of the hallway. Somehow it had been confused to appear there, I figured. Its camera was directed at Farley, but it really just hit the mirror at the end of the hall. The creature recoiled immediately at the sight of itself, and turned to face my side of the hall.

I stared in awe at it, unable to think for a moment, but not needing to, now; it was stuck in the middle of the hallway. It was like it couldn't move between itself.

I'm gonna try to recall what this thing looked like right now, from what I remember. All of the events from yesterday are blurry, but I'm gonna do my best. If anyone wants to try to recreate this thing for me, that would be great, because I want to see it again. I can't stop thinking about it.

It wasn't very big, in any respect. It was maybe only very slightly taller than an average person. It wore red gloves, perhaps to cover up the fact that its skin was lumpy, and bluish in color. It wasn't hard or scaly, but nor was it furry. It had an odd patch of hair up and down its body, but clearly not enough to consider it hairy. Its eyes were so deeply set in its skull that I don't know if I saw them right; but my impression was that they are small, round, and emotionless; they look like black marbles. It had a very blunt snout that didn't go out very long, but in some ways the nose and the whole bottom of the face in fact reminded me of a great cat, think lion. Its arms were freakishly long and lanky, as were its legs. Its torso was disproportionate to them, by human standards anyway. It had a creepy stance, that I just don't know how to quite describe; its shoulders hunched up and the bones seems to poke out. The way its head moved was unnerving and quick. For the most part, all of its skin appeared blue, like I said before. And, of course, it held a small, crappy little camcorder between its spider-like hands.

But the most peculiar thing about it was the jester's hat it wore upon its head. The hat must be what the gloves were supposed to match--and would explain the jingling noises. I didn't get it, but fear and wonder seized me and rooted me to my spot as I watched it, finally caught in a web.

I came back to my senses as I heard Andy stagger up behind me.

"Fucking...monster" I remember him saying, as he took the snub nose out from his pocket and directed it forward. "Die..."

It was at that instant I remembered the man at the opposite end of the hall--Officer Farley.

"Andy, no!" I yelled.

But before Andy could shoot, a shot rang out from the other end of the hall. Glass shattered and fell to ground like raindrops from the first mirror; the bullet went through it entirely. I dived down to the ground immediately. Andy was too far to my right to grab and pull.

The Cameraman was able to disappear once the first mirror shattered.

The bullet whizzed past the next mirror, hitting Andy square in the shoulder and blowing him back a few feet, back onto the ground.

He screamed.

"Oh christ." I said. "Don't shoot!" I yelled down the hall.

Officer Farley came running down the hall--the guy looked like shit. His uniform was all torn up and his face bloodied and cut. He looked delirious.

"Did I shoot somebody?" He asked.

"Yes...my friend." I said. The officer stopped once he got to Andy's body and ran his hand through his hair.

"Oh, god." He said. "Did you see that thing? Jesus Christ I was hallucinating. I knew it. I fucking knew I--"

"No." I told him. "It's not your fault. He's gonna be fine. He's just knocked out now. Listen." I paused. "You weren't hallucinating. If you are so is everyone else. Just get Andy here to room 305, down at the end of the hall there."

I looked down the hall and saw Sarah poking her head out of the doorway, squinting in our direction.

"305?" Dan Farley asked me.

"305." I said. "Stay there. The girls in there know what to do. Keep Andy safe."

I picked up the snub-nose and put it in my pocket. I started toward the staircase as Farley hoisted Andy up.

"Where will you be going?" Farley asked. "You should come with us, I think. Stay away from whatever the hell--"

"No." I told him. "I'm doing something about it."

He looked at me like I was crazy. "What?"

"Get to room 305." I said.

I ran to the staircase and broke through the doorway once again. Farley didn't yell anything after me. I ran down the steps, taking out my phone to check the streams almost instinctively...when I realized there were no streams to check. Andy and my mother would be in the room with Sarah and Debby, who have their phones out and are recording. It would be a big still shot They're all safe from it in there...and it had my sister.

All that was left was me.

I ran down the stairs for the next five minutes, until there were no more stairs to run down. It was completely dark down here. I looked at the sign by the door: Ground Level.

The ground level of a hospital. I had never been in one before, and especially not during a power-outage. I just assumed this would be the darkest place, I just had a strange hunch...and indeed, through the window of the door, it appeared to be completely in the dark.

I began recording on my phone. I flicked on my flashlight. I pushed my way into the darkness, only a thin beam ahead of me as a guide.

I heard nothing down there. I walked forward cautiously, but I didn't know where I was walking to. I just kept going along, spinning my flashlight in each direction around me, hoping for a sign of anything, some kind of trail...

But the floor was tiled. There would be no hope for footprints of any kind, and this thing didn't seem to wild that it would have destroyed anything on its path...

Then I heard a man's agonized scream.

It came from up ahead. I directed my flashlight forward and sprinted down the hallway, through the maze of storage boxes and crates and forward to where I thought I heard the sound.

I reached a door. I almost ran past it, but the light from my flashlight was enough to notice it to my side. I stopped. Did I hear the sound from in here? I wasn't sure. I shined my light down to the rest of the hallway...only to find that after a short while it ended. The doors to the staircase were all I would find if I had kept going.

I turned the knob and walked in.

It was darker than the hallway in here. I tried to pace my breathing, but at this point it seemed to just stop working. I was taking in sharp, cold gulps. And I heard something else breathing, too. Across this very room.

I shined my light across and it hit the Cameraman square in the face. I held my phone up and made sure it knew it was on film. I walked forward, and it seemed to stare back at me. The small, soulless, black marble eyes glistened. They knew. I don't know what that means, but its the best that I can describe it. The eyes knew.

I realized what kind of room I was in at once, as my light revealed the several metal tables lined up on either side with blue, six-foot long bags on top. Near the end of the room, behind where the creatures was hunched, was a metal wall with small square doors on it. But they were not doors, I thought. You pull those out.

I was in the hospital's morgue.

I looked at the creature, and it stared back at me. It was hunched over something. I directed the beam of light to the ground, and shook it away immediately.

I didn't get a long look but the image is burned in my mind. A body. The body was blue in the face. Its chest had been ripped out. The creature's snout dripped. The red gloves on its hands were gone, as was the camera. Its long fingers were soaked with a different kind of red. It was eating. I couldn't bring myself to speak, or do anything for that matter. The monster had its knowing eyes set on me. It appeared to be frozen.

"Do not film." It said.

It's mouth had not moved with the words, I swear to god.

"I filmed self." It said. "Joke is over."

"What are you doing here?" I managed to scream.

The same male scream from earlier rang out throughout the morgue. It was coming from the metal wall. One of those chambers. Somebody was alive in there.

"Why are you here?" I yelled again.

"All was joke." It said.

"What was a joke?" I said.

"All." It said. "All is watched. Food is watched."

I said nothing, my voice failing. I almost began to gasp...the smell!

"I play with food."

"Tell me," I said, breathing through hiccups. "What you are."

It was quiet for a moment. It just stared at me. Then it opened its mouth and made a fleshy, guttural call of some kind that chilled my bones. That was its true voice. My heart began to somehow hammer even faster.

"We always watch." It said. "We do not become watched. We do not watch self. We make mistake. We search other food. Food that cannot watch. Food that cannot play."

The Cameraman disappeared.

I stood, dumbfounded, trying to make sense of the creature's words. I felt they were slipping my mind already. Too many questions were flooding my brain, and I couldn't think. I just stared at where it used to stand, where it had just been eating the cadaver...

Who had been screaming?

I looked at the metal wall.

I checked my phone. I opened Netflix. The black boxes were gone. Shock and relief flooded me completely. A feeling settled over me...a feeling that it was over.

Part 4

The boxes were gone, yes...but as I put my phone away and stood alone in the darkness, I couldn't avoid the reality that somebody was alive in that wall.

I couldn't just turn and leave, no matter how over I felt it was. Not now. I shined my light ahead, against the wall of metal slots. I didn't dare let the beam of light travel too near the floor below it...the smell from the shredded corpse was enough. I was nauseated. But I swallowed. I stepped forward.

I pulled my shirt over nose with my free hand and squinted my eyes as I crossed the room between the tables. I held my flashlight out like it was a weapon. The darkness seemed physical around me, and it squeezed me in. I've never felt more alone than I did when I was in there.

I made sure to walk wide around where I believed that corpse to lay half-eaten on the tile. The smell was only barely buffered through my shirt--it was the strongest stench I've ever come across. Soon enough I found myself near the back wall, and looking up the row of shiny metallic doors. I grabbed the first one at the bottom left by its metal handle and pulled hard.

The thing was heavy. The compartment slid out, my light shined down into to view the contents.

I found myself looking at a stranger. Even though the eyes were closed, and the man was quite clearly stone dead, I felt the corpse was looking at me. I slammed the cold chamber shut in a panic. The smell became too much. It all seemed to hit me at once--I keeled over and vomited loudly on the floor. I was on my knees when the man screamed again from right in front of my face.

It jolted me back, as the scream had come from behind the cold-chamber door next to the first. The door that I was now eye-level with.

I jumped up immediately and pulled the door long open, shining my light down at the prisoner--

My dad's eyes stared back up at me from the chamber. It was him. It must have been.

But this version of my father was badly bruised, beaten, and brutalized. A gash ran across his face from his left ear around to under his nose, and seemed so open and deep that to see open, active eyes above it, and to see his body moving at all, was astounding. His torso was nearly shredded; blood and pus of newer wounds ran over the blood that had seemed to dry a while ago. I instantly backed away from the chamber, unsure of whether or not this was actually happening, beginning to question my own sanity, beginning to wonder if this game had even ended at all.

"Dad?" I said breathlessly.

His eyes became even wider at the site of me.

"No more." He gasped. "Oh, please no."

"Dad, it's me." I said. "It's your son."

"No more, please." He said, begging me. Tears streamed from his eyes. "Please go away. Leave me alone, please. Please."

"Dad?" I asked. "Can't you see me?"

My dad just sobbed harder. He closed his eyes and put his hands against is head. "Please no more. You're not real. None of this is real."

I said nothing, because as I looked into my father's sobbing eyes, my battered father cowering in the cold-chamber, I realized that although he was alive and seemingly conscious, he was just no longer

there.

That's when I ran back upstairs to inform Officer Farley and the others. By this time the police had arrived, without a hitch. They didn't question me right away, and immediately went down to the morgue, where I had told them, through what little I could say, my father was. I told them I didn't know where the missing patient had gone. And I didn't. Up to this point I didn't know where my sister was...but I would've bet my life on it that she was in one of the cold-chambers.

I stayed in my mother's room while the cops were gone. I was distraught for quite a while. I sat and cried to myself by my mother's side for quite a long time. I didn't know that you could feel this much pain without anything being affected physically. It was like my body was going to turn inside-out. My mom was still asleep on her bed. The nurse promised me that both she and Andy were progressing fine and would be fine.

Soon enough, officer Dan Farley came back into my mother's room. I sat and talked with him for the longest time, and we both discovered where our stories had intertwined when it was made clear that Farley had used Platt's abandoned squad car to get to the hospital. Farley had received some medical attention himself by this point, but tried the best he could to shake them all of and insist that he was okay and that he could rest and get better all he wanted after it was over. He was one of the most admirable figures throughout the entire ordeal, I found soon enough.

"I took the shot." He said at one point during the conversation. "I only saw that...that fucking thing, in the middle of the hall. I just knew it was what this was all about. I doubted my own mind after that wreck, everything felt so surreal, and...once I shot the thing was gone. I saw your friend fall. It hit me then what the fuck happened." The 25 year old cop ran his fingers through stringy, dark hair.

"You did what you thought was right." I said. "You tried to save everybody. You were a hero."

Dan Farley didn't respond for a moment, as I guess he was pretty choked up. "Nah. I keep thinking," Farley said. "What if it had been Andy's chest? What if there was no saving him? Shit, kid. I don't know if you understand what degree of clusterfuck this is. I see and hear about clusterfucks everyday--you got fucked up families all the way to some of the nastiest murders. I've never seen anything like this. I've never seen anything like that...that thing. You know. God I don't know what we got into, with this. I don't know what I'm even gonna tell people. What do you tellyourself after shit like this, you know?"

Those words will stick with me. What do you tell yourself?

I stayed at the hospital the entire day, right by my mom's side. It was much longer than expected until the power came back on. It was even longer than that until the police came back upstairs with answers. By the time they arrived I felt that I was going to hurt myself with the violent shaking of my limbs.

They had checked the cold-chambers and among the bodies that had actually meant to be stored there, they had found my sister, still unconscious. They told me she seemed to had suffered a few severe injuries; they talked about lacerations on her legs and cuts up and down her arms. She would be receiving special care in another room, for the time being. But the police and the nurses assured me that she was going to make it.

They also found my father.

Conscious. Alive.

Beaten. Brutalized. Rambling. Delirious. They basically told me that he had lost his mind.

I didn't get to see him that day at all, and most regrettably, I don't think I wanted to. I found I could just face the facts and accept it: my father was gone. His mind had been tortured out of him. I barely even brought to mind the stream of his I had thought to only be a dream; it was quite clear that this wasn't the case, and the fact of my father's torture, in this creature's makeshift lair, now seemed as plain as day.

Andy was knocked out in his room for a while, as his wound was being treated followed by a big cast being put around his shoulder. Debby and Sarah had chose to stay in there with him. Officer Dan and I had had our discussion in my mother's room. By the early hours of Monday morning, Andy was up and seemingly alright, as far as Debby and Sarah said through their texts. Debby and Sarah went on to sleep at the hospital that night, and both went home in the morning.

Dan left a good while before midnight, though. There was a rather long stretch of time where I was left alone by my mom's bedside, and where I could not stop checking my phone. I couldn't stop looking at Netflix to see if those boxes would show up again. I couldn't stop tears from welling in my eyes. I couldn't actually bring myself to believe it was really over, despite how easily everybody else had seemed to accept it. How everybody else was ready to move on.

Because they hadn't see what I had.

Because it's still out there. It exists. That creature inhabits some stretch of space and time, somewhere. Perhaps it belongs to a whole species.

This will never mean as much to anybody but me and my friends and that police officer, Dan Farley. I'll probably keep in contact with that man for the rest of my life. And I don't care what it means to anybody. I know what happened. I know what I saw. I know what it means.

I've had over a day to think about what exactly I saw. I'm sitting here and writing this on Tuesday (7/15/14) morning. Late last night, after Andy was allowed leave the hospital, his father came and took the two of us back to Andy's house. By this time, the nurses were telling me that my sister was in a very stable condition and would be alright and even back to normal within the week. I didn't want to leave my mother, but she had been awake for quite a while by the time Andy was ready to go. She told me I should go, to get a real night's rest, and that she was going to be okay. So now here I am, after a night's rest. Except I don't feel the least bit rested.

If you want my theory, I'm about to give it, but as to what that being truly was, we're just never going to know. As for my thoughts: That creature was searching for food. I don't know if its search is confined to just the earth, or even this dimension. But it is a predator.

But, it is also a jokester. It told me itself. I play with food.

I don't know why it chose me, whether it was just random chance or whether there was something about me and my friends that drew it. But I think it was playing with us. Perhaps it's played with others, but as for my friends and I, I think it fed on whatever it got from toying with us, from watching us. Maybe our emotions? Our connections? Again, these are all just ideas. To keep it simple, my overall idea is as follows: It was playing with its food, and it realized we weren't so easy to play with. So it took its search elsewhere. Elsewhere on Earth? To another planet? Another dimension? I just don't know.

That's all the theory I could come up with by myself. I was thinking my dad would come out and tell

the cops some sort of profound but insane truth bestowed onto him by this creature, but as far as I know he's just been blathering nonsense; he's incomprehensible. I don't know where my father went, but I do know I didn't get him back.

I didn't get anything back through all this, really. I've only lost. I don't know why any of this happened, still. I don't know what that being is, and I don't know why it decided to intrude into my world, into my life, just to test me, to test us, as humans, as food. What else is out there, in other worlds, other dimensions, waiting to enter our own at a whim, to take everything we thought we knew and turn it on its head, to change and ruin our lives forever in their cosmic game? What else is watching? What else always knows? Yes, I still don't know what that being was, what it wanted...but I know that my life changes from this point on, and that this world will never seem as normal or as safe. I don't know where the creature went, what it's searching for, or if it will come back to visit me again. I will never know. I seem to have forgotten all I knew. My mind is in a haze. It's only a matter of time before I lose it, as keeping a firm hold on it is becoming harder with each second that ticks by. Hell, I don't even know the proper name for the being. The only thing I do know about it, about the watcher, the jokester, is that I will know it by one title that will always bring me back to that morgue, one name that will always force me to look back into the lost eyes of my father and the knowing eyes of a monster, that will bring me back to that first night, and with unshakable clarity send the events ever since flashing through my now forever-stirring mind's eye:

The Cameraman.

I Shouldn't Have Connected to My Neighbor's WiFi...

by Crapple_Facts

First Runner Up - July Monthly Contest

Part 1

7/16/2014

I should partially feel responsible for all this but I have no idea what to do from this point. I'm stuck with using a really crappy ISP at home which frequently leads me to not be able to get out onto the internet. Usually when an outage happens my wife and I would just wait for our services to come back up by leaving the house and doing something else together. We recently had a child though, which makes it hard to just pick up and go.

It all began on a warm summer day as the rain was starting, we were watching some random documentaries on Netflix when it happened. The movie froze and before we had time to think about what had happened we both knew. The router's lights had shut off and were flashing over the POWER section of our modem. We both sighed having JUst put our child down for a nap after a long night of sleeplessness. We have no DVDs or Blu-Rays since we've become so accustomed to just streaming everything so that was out of the question.

We live in a relatively large complex so naturally I did what any self-respecting guy would do. I scanned around for open WIFI networks to connect to so that we could keep watching our shows and wait for the storm to pass. Normally I don't find anything, but today I had just happened to find that a new wireless point had come up. It seemed normal, the SSID was "Linksys-2q5dy8ht." making me think it was one of my neighbors who had just got a new router. This is where I made my first big mistake. After connecting to the SSID, I connected our Chromecast to the network so that we could continue watching our documentary.

My wife was a bit leary of connecting but was pretty excited to have something to do while our child was asleep. We had just finished watching the documentary when we heard the all too familiar grunting and crying of our baby. "Well, that was fun" was the thought, as I shut off Netflix and my wife went upstairs to get the baby. I left the TV on, the Chromecast filling the room with it's idle screen as we continued with our daily parental activities.

The day went on normally enough, feeding the baby, playing with the baby, changing the baby, getting the occasional snack from the fridge. My wife had just left again to put the baby to bed. I was preparing dinner when suddenly I heard strange noises coming from the TV. The TV suddenly flickered as an indicator dropped down from the Chromecast saying "theWatcher" had started playing a video on youtube. I felt myself freeze as I looked onto the TV. A dimly lit, falling apart room with a random chair in the middle. The Camera was panning side to side and all I could hear was the heavy breathing of a man from behind the camera. The video couldn't have been longer than 15 seconds, but it felt like forever. The image of the dim room is engraved in my head, the cracked wooden floors, the peeling paint from the walls. I have no idea what the room is supposed to represent, but fear suddenly filled me as I realiZed that whoever I connected to was more saavy with technology than I had

thought.

I shut the TV off, disconnected the Chromecast from the TV and disconnected us from the WiFi. My wife didn't see what was going on, and I didn't want to tell her to rile her anxiety up. On Top of this thoughts suddenly flooded my head "What other information could they have gotten from the time we were connected to that wireless AP." I suddenly felt ill over how stupid I had been connecting to that SSID.

As my wife went upstairs again to tend to our now crying baby I went through all our accounts, changing passwords and checking balances. Everything seemed together and I let out a sigh of relief. As I looked at my pC, I noticed it hAd disconnected from the SSID and the SSID had been taken down. I rubbed my forehead a bit and covered my mouth wondering if maybe they had just renamed their SSID or passworded it And this was a prank from their end to teach us a lesson.

...

I thought that, that was the end of it… but when I got to work and checked my email I was filled with dread. "ImWatching@you.now" had sent me an email … it had an attachment… it was the video they showed me earlier. Reddit, I really fucked up, and have no idea what to do now, or what kind of shit I've gotten myself into. I've uploaded the video to a new YouTube account to keep myself anonymous with the recent compromise and hopefully keep them from getting access to anything. I've also attached a screenshot of the email I got.

Link to YouTube

Screenshot of my inbox

Screenshot of the E-Mail

...

UPDATE 7/17/2014

I took some people's advice. Firstly I've made sure my computer is formatted and have made sure that I'm off the neighbor's WiFi. I still haven't received anything new, but can't help feeling a little frustrated about how spooked I am. People have been telling me I have probably nothing to fear since the neighbor is probably a lanky teenager. I've looked into the email I received earlier and extracted the following information from gmail.

Link to PasteBin

I'm not really too sure what's in that file so if anyone can figure it out that'd be great. Doesn't really look like it has anything too obvious... I may take a WiFi analyzer I got for my phone and see if I can find his apartment once the SSID comes back up, just to see who exactly I'm dealing with. I still haven't told my wife, part of me feels she shouldn't have to worry about it with our kid and all.

Part 2

UPDATE 7/18/2014

This update is a big one. The situation has gotten out of hand. I'm sitting here at my desk at work unsure what to do. I'm covered in a thin layer of stress sweat and the humid day isn't helping things. I feel like I might faint.

Before I get to the bulk of the update, I'll do some quick catch up for people who didn't have a chance to see what was going on in the comments.

Earlier I posted a link to a PasteBin containing the SMTP information for the emails being sent. /u/yellowscissorsdetermined the SMTP server links to the website http://sneakysneaky.comli.com/ . It contains a bunch of cryptic messages in binary and the message "I'm Watching You Now." in the middle of the page. The binary converts to a taunting message that states "You are trying way too hard to find me aren't you.... It's funny when I already know where you are. What did you think? I'd encode my location in here. The chair is waiting for you... I'm waiting for you, I'm watching you." 30

/u/yellowscissors 's Screenshots of the Source | Site

/u/versees also deciphered that his titles mean

2q5dy8ht = watching, 232q5dy8ht = wewatching and qo2q6w2q5dy8ht = alwayswatching.

It's QUite obvious we're dealing with some lanky nerd who knows a bit too much about computers. At least, that's what I thought until this morning. I had recei7Ved a call from my wife. She was confused as to why I would leave such a creepy note on the fridge. I felt my heart drop into my stomach. My wife and I don't leave notes to each other so naturally I didn't look on the fridge. She could tell by my silence that something was wrong. I paused for a moment and explained what had been going on. She almost had a panic attack on the phone. Her panic then turned into anger when she realized I knew what was going on and didn't tell her. I should have just taken everyone's advice and told her. She's taking the baby somewhere safe and leaving the house. She won't tell me where and isn't answering my phone calls. At least they're out of the house and safe.

I thought that was the end of it. I was about to call the police when I noticed another email. He knew I didn't tell my wife. The son of a bitch has been reading this thread and following me. I'm going to continue updating this thread because I want him to know that he's fucking with the wrong guy. I'm going to find him and show him what happens when some lanky little shit breaks into my home and threatens my wife and child. I'm going to find him and make him beg for mercy. I'll make him wish he had never set his grubby little fingers onto a keyboard. That stupid little prepubescent shit thinks he can do this to me over a little over an hours time of using his stupid little WiFi network. If you think that I was scared by you, you're going to see the exponentially higher amount of fear in yourself when I find you. I'll even record it so everyone online can see what a little bitch you are.

Mark my words, I will find you. I will find you. Not only have you sent me into an unfathomable rage but you've frightened my wife and endangered my family. There is NO Excuse for what you've done. Just you wait until I get back home. We're going to settle this like men. I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid. I will NEVER be afraid of you.

I need a moment to calm down. In the meantime I've posted some screens of the newest email and am

in the process of uploading the new video he sent. For all those wondering, he hid in my kitchen closet. Keep in mind he’s also trying to scare me by editing up his stupid little video. I’m going to take my phone and scan the WiFi network and look for him, and since you’re reading this, maybe you should be a man, turn on your SSID and let me find you.

My Inbox

The E-Mail

Video

PasteBin of SMTP

...

UPDATE

Firstly, I want to thank you guys for all the help. There's a few things to update on.

Just like last time theWatcher's SMTP had indications that it links to youjustcantresist.net46.net . It's basically the same page as the other, only this time the audio is heavy breathing, the text says "I'M WAITING FOR YOU." and the binary was deciphered to be

"Waiting, Waiting, Waiting. We are Waiting to

see if you can

uija Sedia Cathedra Kresls us...."

/u/Stonar pointed out that the first letter of each language for Chair, spells out... KILL. "See if you can KILL us."

I didn't notice the cryptic messages in the video he sent, probably because I'm too worried about my wife and kid.

Those turned out to be Binary and more messages credit to /u/Kimett for the images.

I know people have been trying to figure out what the binary means from the image, I'll try looking through the video and finding if it looks sharper..not uploaded to YouTube. I'll post any results here.

Mini-Update

I think I got a little better look at the binary:

Link to PasteBin

After I got home, the first thing I did was check if his SSID was up again. I know I should have tried to call wife again, but I feel like if I find this guy all my problems will be solved. I've been sitting her for hours watching my computer screen and waiting. Nothing. He must be scared, go figure. I'll let you all know when his SSID comes up and post an update with the video I take of him.

Part 3

UPDATE 7/19/2014

I'm so sorry everyone. I'm so sorry for getting you all involved in this. I'm so sorry.

I would have posted this update sooner, but I'm currently hiding out in a hotel room in an undisclosed area. I know this is all starting to sound cliche, but I may not be the only one in a hotel after tonight.

The SSID came up earlier. It came up as Linksys-43f3oq589h. I was a bit worried it might be another neighbor, but as it was the only open network I decide to see where it was coming from. I had looked for hours, walking past the cookie cutter hallways, from floor to floor. I live on the top floor of our nine floor complex, so you can imagine how amazed I was that the signal was just coming up a couple of bars 3 floors down.

I was about to give up after reaching the final residential door of the second floor, when I noticed that the mechanical room adjacent to the sprinkler room had a giant gash across itself, as if someone had tried to break in. I was about to check to see if it was unlocked when I noticed the door had been propped open. What followed afterwards still shakes me to this very moment.

As you can imagine the sprinkler room is a very poorly maintained mechanical space. I tried the light switch and like some cliche out of a horror movie it didn't work. Immediately I was greeted by an ear piercing screech. I hope it was just one of mechanisms in the boiler room, but something about it was so unnatural. The sound is still stuck in my ears. I stood there for a while, looking towards the darkness as if something would emerge from it.

The sound finally got to me, I was going to leave. I was turning around when the glow of a screen caught my eye, and the bright green flickering of LED lights. Somehow, for some reason, my fear went away. Mr. big bad hacker had left what he was torturing me with behind with the door open. I walked down the stairs, into the darkness. I had to climb over several pipes and I finally reached his little set up.

The router isn't a linksys. It's some sort of Cisco device, which must have some incredible range. He had several wires coming out of it, perhaps a way to wire through more signal? I'm not really sure. That wasn't the part that was bothering me.

The tablet was some sort of windows 8 tablet. It was unlocked. A folder was up on the screen name "theWatcher" and inside it were two other folders "Watching" and "EndOfWatch". I figured the "Watching" would just have my name in it, but the "EndofWatch " intruiged me. I clicked it. It contained another folder, with my username on it. It felt like I was falling down a cliff when I opened the folder. More folders, each with a different Label "Financial, Pictures, Video, Genealogy, GPS Location Data." I opened a few of the folders to check his bluff….it wasn't a bluff. I didn't feel like I needed to look anymore, I was ready to leave.

I felt my heart racing, but felt that I couldn't leave without checking what "Watching" contained. I'm so sorry everyone. I'm so sorry. We're all in this together now, there's no way any of us can turn back. We have to find theWatcher. It seems like he can somehow get our information just by us knowing about him. Perhaps, we only know about him, by him knowing about us.

I'm posting the video I took below. I promised you all I would record me finding him, I have failed to catch him, but you all deserve to see what I saw.

Link to the Video

I’ve been trying to reach my wife for the last few hours. The sound of her voice picking up on voice mail is enough to keep me from going insane. I wish I could hear her voice talking to me, even the sound of her breath would calm me. Perhaps if I find theWatcher, and get him to go away, she’ll come back to me. Maybe in a few days when I recollect myself, I will gain the courage to go back to the mechanical room and track him down...

Part 4

I just want everyone to know that I'm filing a police report. I should have probably done it from the start instead of letting him do what he did. My husband, was a good man, perhaps a bit overzealous at times, but a good husband and father. Since you are all are probably wondering what happened to me and my baby, well, we ran off to my sister's apartment and have been staying in waiting for this all to blow over. I'm very worried about my husband.

As of this morning however, I found his phone in my sister's mailbox. It wasn't in an envelope, just in a mailbox as if someone had dropped it off. I put the phone on my sister's counter and ran to call the police. Though my husband and I didn't have the perfect relationship, especially when he went on rants about how controlling I am, I do love him. As I was running I heard it vibrate. My heart jumped and I walked over to his phone. It was an app called BaconReader. My sister and I had no idea what it was, thank goodness her neighbor was around to help.

They read the posts my husband wrote to you all. Thank you for trying to help him, I really wish he would have taken your advice.I've been trying to reach him for days as well, but he hasn't been responding to my messages.It's a shame that he didn't try to reach out to me or the police. My sister's neighbor felt the same way. Now with his phone here, I don't see much reason in trying to reach him anymore. At least my sister's neighbor can help with the baby from time to time while I juggle the police.

If you're all wondering what other information is left on the phone, well, it was empty. The only thing left on it was a fully black picture. All of his apps, videos, and images were corrupted. Probably from him dropping it or whatever caused it to get cracked on it's way back to my sister's home.

Just so you all know, I really think you should stop looking for this "Watcher" character. She sounds very dangerous, and from the phone I received in the mail, she looks like he may be as well. Don't try looking at any of the clues this "Watcher" gives you, just let the police do their job. I'm going to give you all the advice to call the police too. Any help you can get is important at this point.

I'd like to take some time to thank you all again. Maybe if I had taken the time to force my husband to come with me, he wouldn't be in such a dark place. Whether I did or didn't force him to come, may have not changed the outcome of this. Although, I can't help wondering how things would have ended up had I stayed. Though, maybe I made the right choice, since I do care for my child more than anything. Could you all do me a favor, could you all look into your webcams so that I can see your faces? H ello. I just wanted you all to think about something. Now, if I can see you through your webcams, do you feel safe looking at this thread with your smart phone? Good, because I can see you and what you're looking at.

I know you're all very grammatical, and I'm no good with computers, so I hope you don't mind if my sister's neighbor looks over my post and edits it. They probably wouldn't want me to include this bit but I want you all to know.

I wish I could keep you all updated like my husband did, but I have a baby to think about and you all have your own lives to go back to. If you're worried about how I'll survive without my husband, you all have nothing to worry about. I have plenty of people watching out for me. I also have plenty of people who donate to my cause, you could almost say they're just giving me their money.

UPDATE 7/28/2014

202 430 5798

Her Name Was Emma

by alackofcoasters

Second Runner Up - July Monthly Contest

Her name was Emma.

That's what everyone called her, anyways. Sometimes they would call her Em, sometimes someone would slip up and call her Emily. She was a part of our group of girlfriends growing up in a large town, not quite big enough to be a city but big enough that there was still privacy between neighbors.

We called ourselves the "Unbreakable Six," because there was me, Summer, Mel, Nina, and Jules.

And there was Emma.

Emma started off as a practical joke by the other girls in the fourth grade. It was probably Jules that started it. She was always playing pranks of people. In high school, she even got suspended once for going too far, and had to babysit for hours to buy that girl a new cellphone. Or maybe it was Summer, who always seemed too busy with music and band to think of such an elaborate prank. Or maybe it was Mel and Nina, who were best friends and could have lived without us, always conspiring together like they were twin sisters.

Either way, I bought my lunch, cold cut sandwich and carrot sticks and a pint of orange juice (I couldn't stand milk; it would account for how short I ended up being) and walked over to our lunch table. Jules looked excited, waving me over to them.

"Lotte! Look!" I wasn't sure where I was supposed to be looking. "This is Emma. She moved here from Los Angeles!" We lived far inland and into the boonies. Los Angeles was glitzy and glamorous and chic compared to the flat houses and half-rate high school football that was the only real source of entertainment in the area.

"Uh, what?"

"Los Angeles, dummy," Jules said, rolling her eyes. "She's not in our class, she's in Miss Lark's, but she's the same grade as us. Isn't that cool?"

I still wasn't sure where I was supposed to be looking. I sat down with my tray uneasily, wondering what I was supposed to see. "Who?"

Summer jabbed me in the side. "You're being rude," she hissed quietly. Summer was all about rules and manners. "Say hi to Emma."

I looked around our table, from Jules to Mel to Nina to Summer and back to Jules, who was waiting impatiently. I don't know. I was weak. I wanted to fit in. I didn't get it.

"Hi, Emma."

They seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief, like I was making everything awkward. "Charlotte's weird sometimes, but her brother has a Nintendo that he lets us play sometimes."

They kept on talking, chatting about whatever fourth grade girls chat about, and I ignored it. If they wanted to play that prank, then that was fine. I wasn't going to buy into it. I was always a precocious child; I knew that what they were looking for was a reaction.

That's how Emma became a normal part of our lives. It was crazy. We would buy her birthday

presents, and they'd disappear like they were taken. I wonder how many candle making kits and Mancala games Jules had piling up in her closet after all these birthdays. One year, Mel even got Emma a really nice necklace, and that disappeared too.

We never went to her house. I asked Nina about it when I was sure that "Emma" wasn't there.

She gave me this scandalized look. "Lotte, don't be rude. Emma's family doesn't have that much money, she's embarrassed to let us come over. She told Mel that, who told me, and it makes sense. I mean, what she wears all the time… I mean, we still love her, we'll always love her, she's one of us. But don't rub in the fact that we can't go to her house. That's mean."

After I was scolded so whole-heartedly by Nina, I didn't ask again. They were covering their bases really well, and by seventh grade, I had to accept that they were taking this prank all the way.

It was weirdly comforting in a way. There was this silent friend that I never saw, but she was always around. We would leave seats open for her, and when we did the buddy system someone always had Emma, walk into the bathroom by herself. When we decided that we wanted to be lame and come up with a name for our group of friends, we decided on the Unbreakable Six, even though there were really only five of us.

I was curious in sophomore year of high school when we were having a sleepover. Summer was at band practice late and Emma couldn't make it, she had to work on her science project, according to Mel. So I asked Jules, the likely mastermind behind it all, "If you were going to write a story about Emma, like her biography, how would you describe her? Down to every detail?"

Jules loved stuff like that. She wanted to be a writer someday. "Well, she's taller than you, which isn't hard." I threw a pillow at her that she dodged deftly. "She's medium build—" Jules dropped her voice to a whisper, "—even though she gained a little weight recently but we're not gonna tell her and she's still beautiful.

"And… she has green eyes and brown hair, and she's got freckles. She hates getting her picture taken. She's nice, but quiet, and she dances really beautifully, I mean, you've seen her, right?" Of course, that time a few months ago when we turned on some music and danced around together to practice dancing at homecoming, so we didn't look weird or do it wrong. We stopped after a while and oohed and ahhed at empty space for a while.

I didn't ask any more questions. I knew that they would keep up the charade for as long as they could manage.

It was in our senior year of high school that it happened. I don't know why it set me off, not really. It was something little, something stupid. We were hanging out in Nina's pool, even though it was still too cold to swim. Teeth chattering and goosebumps rising on our skin, we were waiting for the Jacuzzi to heat up to jump in. The cold sunlight cast a long shadow, and the wine coolers we snuck earlier was making that shadow seem menacing. It was annoying for me for reasons I can't place.

"Look at Emma, Lotte!" Jules called. She wolf-whistled and hooted, over the top like Jules always is. "Hot mama, look at that booty!"

I didn't know where to look, like always. Like for the past nine years of my life, I didn't know where to look. Since the fourth grade at our lunch table, dancing in Summer's living room, homecoming, football games, at the park, in class, anywhere, I didn't know where to look, because Emma wasn't there.

That's when I snapped.

"Fuck Emma!" I screamed. "And fuck all of you! Have you been waiting for this! The moment I completely lose my fucking mind! Well, here it is!" I waved my arms around, manic and furious. "Emma. Isn't. Real. Emma isn't fucking real!"

I looked at their confused faces. "Oh, you're gonna keep this up? I fucking hate you guys, you've always done this, made me the butt of your stupid prank for almost ten years, guys! TEN YEARS!" I slipped a little on the wet concrete but regained my balance. "Fuck you, I hate you so much." Tears welled in my eyes, years and years of pent up frustration finally spilling over. "Emma was some stupid prank that got out of hand and I can't believe that none of you ever had the balls to tell me that it was a stupid prank! No, it had to keep going, you had to keep laughing behind my back! It's not fair!"

Summer was furious. "Lotte, don't fucking be this way, Emma is right there and you're being a bitch, why are you doing this? Are you mad?"

Mel spoke up in a tiny voice. "Lotte, you look hot too, I mean, you look good in your bathing suit too."

"Yeah, but don't take out your anger on Emma, god," Nina said, rolling her eyes. Nina walked over to the side of the pool and reached out a hand, like she was rubbing someone's back. "It's okay, Emma, Lotte's just under a lot of stress right now, figuring out where she wants to go for college."

"Shut up!" I howled miserably. "Stop it, stop it, stop it! Emma isn't real! She's not there! How could you guys do this to me?"

They were starting to look scared. They were really invested in this prank. I wondered what the endgame was. When were they going to start laughing, when were they going to jump up and say, "Gotcha!"

I had enough of this. If they wanted to play charades, then let's play charades.

The next part was a blur. I don't remember it, not even now. But I walked over to where Emma was and I kicked at the air. I heard a scream and I slipped on the slick, wet concrete and hit my head. There was blood everywhere. There was so much screaming, but I kept on kicking and punching and fighting until I blacked out completely.

I came to a day later in the hospital. My parents were there, and so were my friends. They were pale and tired and miserable looking. My heart panged. I must have really scared them. When my parents left, Jules approached me. She took my hand.

She began crying. The others stared crying too. "I'm sorry, Lotte," she wept. "I'm really sorry."

It was almost frightening, looking at the way my friends were. They were beside themselves in the privacy of the hospital room. I started crying too. I wasn't sure why, but I started stammering apologies too, like if we all said sorry things could go back the way they did. "I'm sorry," I cried.

Summer was the only one who didn't look like she forgave me completely. She looked at me, eyes red and cheeks pink and wobbly chinned, and said, "Are you?"

I didn't have to answer. The nurse came in to change the bandages on my head.

For the rest of the year, no one mentioned Emma. Emma only belonged to our tight-knit group of friends, so there was no mention of Emma. One time, a cop came to the principal's office, and Mel and Nina were quick to drag us away.

After the accident, I withdrew from everyone. I didn't talk to anyone. I didn't go to Summer's recital, I didn't go to Mel's birthday party, I didn't do anything. I didn't go to prom, just stared at the ceiling, wondering what had happened. Emma was in most of my life, and now she felt like a ghost.

I graduated high school and left immediately to go to a university far away in Southern California, where the weather was always perfect and the beach was a five minute walk away. I started to recover. I realized that I was depressed after what had happened, understanding that my best friends chose a punchline over me. Unbreakable Six, yeah right.

I got good grades, volunteered at an animal shelter, found a boyfriend. He was so nice to me, even when I got quiet when he asked about high school. He never pushed, just held me when I had bad days and made me pancakes.

It was four years later when I was about to finish up college when I ran into an old classmate from high school. Her name was Annie. She hung out with a different crowd than me and my friends. Most people did; the six—the five of us were a clique of our own, separated from everyone else.

I ran into her in our apartment complex. It turns out that she was living there the whole time and we didn't know. I wasn't necessarily friends with her, but overreacted the way you do when you see someone that you haven't seen in a long time.

"It's been forever!"

"Oh my god!"

I went to her apartment for coffee and saw that she was packing up her things. "Moving back home for a while until I find a job, yuck." I saw a thick book on the sofa. "Oh, yeah, that's our senior yearbook. I was flipping through it when I found it in my bookshelf."

I didn't bother getting a yearbook. I didn't have friends at the end of high school. But I was curious to see what I looked like back then, if I had gained or lost weight, if my skin had gotten any better. I opened up the first page and was instantly confused.

"'For Emma'?" I read aloud from the first page. It was a dedication. My mind raced; was there someone named Emma in our year?

"Yeah, it's really sad what happened to her," Annie said, handing me a mug of hot coffee.

I flipped through the yearbook, looking for a trace of Emma. Then, I found it. My heart stopped, mouth going dry. My hands shook as I held the yearbook, looking at the photograph.

It was a picture of the Unbreakable Six. We stood with our arms slung around hips and shoulders, sticking close together for the photograph. There was Summer at the end, then me, then Jules, then Mel, then Nina, then…

I had never seen this girl before in my life. Never. But there she was. I can't even remember getting this picture taken. She was right there at the end. Green eyes, brown hair, muffin top, shy smile, threadbare shirt and ripped jeans, looking straight at the camera like the rest of us. She looked as normal as can be, just another teenage girl.

Annie looked over my shoulder. "Oh, there you all are. What did you call yourselves again?"

"What happened to her?" I couldn't even touch her photograph, just let my shaking finger hover over her face.

Annie fell quiet. "Well, I guess you might not really remember that well, after your head injury. And

you just kind of faded away from everything, stopped doing much at all. But Emma disappeared. Out of nowhere. The cops came by once to ask questions, but her parents were both poor and junkies, so no one really cared. Just another girl that disappeared."

I left Annie and went back to my apartment, the one I shared with my boyfriend. He took one look at my face and started boiling some water for tea, grabbed a blanket to throw over my shoulders. I pulled away from him, locked myself in my room. I stared at the ceiling. I was eighteen again, lost and confused.

The girl's green eyes haunted me. Emma's eyes haunted me.

I went on facebook and found my old friends, my best friends, and I told them, "Please meet me back at home. It's important."

I returned back to our big-town little-city, went to the newest Starbucks and waited. They trickled in, one by one. Jules, small time blogger who works at an Italian restaurant until she made it big. Summer, brown and freckled from band camp, coaching kids for their field shows. Nina, the hot librarian at their old high school. Mel, her belly swollen with her second child, wedding ring secured to her left hand by her high school sweetheart.

My friends were not the same, and neither was I.

I cut to the chase. I couldn't spare a moment for small talk. "What happened to Emma?"

They exchanged uneasy glances. They knew this was coming. "Nothing," Jules said with finality. "Emma wasn't real."

"She was just a trick," Nina said softly. "She was a prank."

I figured they might pull this shit. I reached into my bag and slammed the yearbook down on the table, making our drinks rattle and one fall over, spilling tea onto the ground. No one moved to try to pick it up. They stared at the yearbook instead. "Emma was real," I finally whispered. "Emma was real. What happened to her?"

"Nothing—"

"Cut the crap, Jules," Summer snapped. She turned to me. "Lotte, you killed Emma that day by the pool. You went nuts and kicked her and kept kicking her when you slipped and fucked up your head, and you bashed her head and she fell in the pool and it was too late to save her and we had to worry about you and—"

"Summer!" Jules shrieked, swatting her in the arm. I was silent, absorbing what Summer said.

Mel spoke up in a tiny voice. "Lotte… we weren't going to let you go to jail."

I looked up at my friends, tears running down my cheeks. "Why?"

Nina reached across the table and took my hand. She squeezed it, hard. "Because we're the Unbreakable Six. We don't break because one went crazy and another's dead."

I excused myself to the restroom and wept for what seemed like hours. It couldn't have been that long, but there were angry knocks on the door from other patrons who needed the restroom. I sat there on the dirty floor, sobbing, until I had cried everything out.

I came out where my friends—my best friends—were still waiting. I sat down in my seat and faced them. "I want to turn myself in."

There was an outcry of different responses. Summer seemed willing, ready to have me turn myself in to the police. Jules yelled out about them all getting in trouble. Mel started to cry. "You don't have to," Nina said. "You don't have to, we got rid of all the evidence, we buried her far away where no one would find her."

"I want to turn myself in," I repeated firmly. "I killed her. I'll tell the cops that it was just me, that I buried her. Tell me where she is so I can tell them where I put her. None of you will get in trouble, it wasn't your fault." I thought I had finished crying, I thought I had nothing left, but I choked out what I wanted to say for so long. "I never saw her."

They looked at me expectantly.

"I never saw her, not even once. I thought… I thought it was just a big prank you were playing on me, I didn't want you to laugh at me… The girl in the yearbook, I had never seen her before. I just played along."

Nina nodded. "I thought it was weird that you were always so cold to her. Like you didn't even acknowledge her."

"She really liked you," Mel said. "She thought you were so smart, that you were going to go out in the world and do amazing things. She would always talk about that."

I felt as though my heart would burst. "I swear I never saw her. Something must be wrong with me, but I never saw her or heard her…" I cleared my throat. "Show me where you buried her."

We got into Summer's car and drove out far, into a park in a different city. The park was huge and overgrown, like no one had been there to take care of it in a long, long time. I got out of the car, and left behind by a worker long ago was a rusty shovel. I took it with me.

Jules led the way, deep into the park, deep through the trees, until we came to a small clearing. The dirt wasn't fresh, there were no markers or indicators, but the way my friends' faces paled at the sight, I knew this was it. Emma was there, under our feet.

"I gotta see her," I whispered. I dug the shovel into the ground. "I gotta see her."

Mel didn't want to see anything, so she and Nina left back for the car. Jules and Summer found different tools, a hoe and a rake, and we started digging. Blisters rose and popped on my hands from the old shovel, but I kept digging as beads of sweat rolled down my neck, my back.

The three of us worked together in silence, digging up our best friend. Suddenly, Summer jumped back in disgust, throwing her hoe aside. Jules did the same, stepping out of the hole. We looked down. Summer gagged, covering her mouth and nose, and Jules shook her head at the sight.

Me? I laughed and laughed and laughed, tears streaming down my face, laughing until it hurt as I looked down into an empty grave.

21 Day Quarantine

by jdpatric

Third Runner Up - July Monthly Contest

Part 1

I've just returned from Africa, Guinea to be specific. I was there interning for the CDC in cooperation with the WHO. If you haven't heard what's going on in West Africa right now…then I'll give you the quick and dirty; there's a massive Ebola virus outbreak. I worked as a tech assisting with incredibly ill patients. Most of them didn't make it where I worked. The few that did survive were in bad shape and would probably carry traces of their struggles with them for the remainder of their lives. It wasn't pretty.

I have a degree in biology and microbiology and have been working towards a masters in epidemiology. I plan on eventually getting my doctorate…but that's neither here nor there right now. One of my professors invited us to apply for a summer internship with the CDC working with the WHO in an attempt to find a vaccine for the Ebola virus outbreak that's been ravaging West Africa. I put my resume in the mix and was rewarded with a spot on the trip. There were four of us in total and we all went to separate "hospitals." They weren't really hospitals…it was a series of tents set up to hold the ill until they either got better or died. I know it sounds harsh, but when someone's veins have deteriorated to the point that a nurse can't even get a needle into them without them catastrophically failing then the chances are they aren't going to make it.

The reason this disease has been spreading so quickly in the area is quite simple; the method the indigenous peoples use to bury their dead. They insist on washing the corpses before they put them in the ground. This puts them in direct contact with bodily fluids contaminated with a virus that has at least an 80% mortality rate and can remain dormant for up to twenty-one days. Someone could basically be dead on their feet for three weeks before symptoms begin to manifest. Death from internal bleeding comes quickly to those who it decides to take mercy on. Others linger for weeks.

I've been quarantined for the last three weeks to ensure that I was safe to return home. It was standard procedure; anyone who was leaving the facility that had been in any sort of contact with the patients, even while wearing hazmat suits, had to wait a minimum of three weeks before leaving. No exceptions. One of the other assistants, a local man, was informed that his wife had succumbed to an unrelated illness and that he was required to stay for three more weeks before going to be with his family. It was strictly enforced. We planned our trip accordingly and collected our data and samples in May, having last been in contact with the patients or samples a little over three weeks ago so that we could return at the beginning of July.

The doctor I was working with was a somewhat local one who seemed to have delusions of grandeur…not to mention a death wish. He was originally from southeast Nigera, he didn't act like the rest of the doctors, and seemed to have his own bizarre agenda the entire time I spent with him. He behaved like a normal enough person, but he would frequently disregard the strict safety rules and, on occasion, nearly expose himself to the virus. I watched in horror one afternoon as he removed the

helmet to his mask to wipe a bead of sweat from his face. There was no earthly power that could've convinced me to remove my mask in such a situation; if someone sneezed from across the room the microscopic beads of water could travel at upwards of thirty miles per hour infecting him before he even had a chance to get his mask back on. We were burning bed sheets to prevent the spread of this horrible virus while he's removing his mask in patient's room because he's uncomfortable. It amazed me that he hadn't taken ill yet. I reported him to the WHO rep onsite. The WHO rep promptly told me that no one in their right mind would do that and I received a verbal reprimand, but otherwise nothing happened.

If he didn't care that he got infected that was one thing, but I had no such desire; I took great care to avoid this man outside of the ward. He lived on the other side of the city, and kept mostly to himself when at the ward outside of patient's rooms. It wasn't hard. I had to have one interaction with him that I can remember. He was required, as part of our assessment of the working conditions of the healthcare providers in the facility, to give us a cheek swab. I took this swab with the utmost care, and made sure to wear a full hazmat suit. I treated him as if he were a patient. I had an excuse all prepared in case he asked; "this was my standard procedure, the suit's clean, and I don't like taking risks," but he didn't…he simply smiled and stared at me with eyes that seemed to look right through me. His eyes seemed off, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I never got a really close look at them. I burned the suit like the rest after decontamination. His sample was checked under a video microscope and placed under observation like the rest.

Finally, over three weeks ago, my group had our final decontamination. We stayed quarantined in our respective facilities and studied the data, tapes, and recordings. The data was going to make a fine thesis that would probably help me greatly in the pursuit of my doctorate. Each of the four students had to provide a sample as well, and as we were nearing the end of the three weeks, all had been deemed clean showing zero signs of infection. Everyone was healthy, which, even with the precautions we'd taken, was a fantastic relief.

The healthcare workers, for the most part, had remained unaffected by the virus. Only one of the workers became infected during our stay and that was a known accidental breach; she'd been unfortunate enough to stick herself through the suit with a contaminated needle. Mercifully, she'd actually survived her infection and lived to give us a second sample of someone who'd beaten Ebola.

We had recorded enough data and videos of the various samples we'd taken to last for months, but we were on a time schedule, so some of it waited until we got back home. As we were leaving the facility I noticed that the WHO rep was a different one than the person who'd verbally told me to basically keep a lid on it. I questioned her and she informed me that she'd only been assigned this post that very day as the last WHO rep had been killed in a botched robbery a few days prior while in Sierra Leone. I questioned her as to what she knew about the doctor who I'd been working with and she claimed that no one under that name worked under the facility. As she flipped through the pages, she did remark that a patient under the same name had passed away very early on in the outbreak. She described him and showed me a grainy photograph of what appeared to be a man near death lying in a bed. That was him. That was the doctor. I could see it in his eyes and I figured out why they looked odd; there were small capillaries that had burst from the infection in his eyes. The man in the picture was cremated less than six hours after the picture was taken as he died before they could even try to treat him. I told her of this and she made a note…but mostly told me that I was probably seeing things

as this man was long dead.

I told my professor and he seemed more worried than I; he'd had a similar experience during the Ebola outbreak in 1976. He began to ask the man's name, but then stopped. We were sitting in a transport when he walked by. We both caught sight of him and as the transport wheeled away we could see the "doctor" board a separate one headed offsite. As part of our journey we were headed to sea for a ride to a neighboring, unaffected village before heading home.

My professor contacted the WHO rep when we arrived on our ship. She sent us his picture and my professor turned pale. He wasn't a tan man to begin with as he was already in his sixties, but what color he had drained from his face when he saw the picture; It was the same, seemingly dead, man who'd impersonated a doctor back in 1976, he was sure of it. As best we could tell he was already long gone. We had no way of knowing where exactly, except that the transport he was on went directly to the airport.

We didn't know what to do so we turned to analyzing the samples and the data we'd collected before our quarantine. The samples had long since been discarded, but the video recordings of the samples under a microscope still needed to be analyzed. I went directly to the mystery doctor's sample. Doctor Akachi, as he was called. I put the recording of his sample up to analyze and started to research his name. I couldn't find anything aside from a few mad scientist types in various anime genres. I did a search on just the surname, as that was all I had to go on, and found something interesting; his name roughly translates to "the hand of God." When I thought of that it explained a lot about his demeanor; he would frequently refer to himself as "the one who does God's work." I'm not sure he was talking about healing anymore.

Suddenly my computer began to light up with alerts; the good doctor's sample was off the charts infected. I'd sped the recording up a great deal and by the time it neared the end he went from perfectly healthy individual at day twenty to living zombie at day twenty-one. He had enough Ebola virus in his system that I thought at first someone had merely switched the samples without anyone noticing until I checked and double-checked the records; the sample dish hadn't moved once. According to the logs, kept by aids who weren't always medically trained, his blood PH dropped from 7.4 at day twenty to less than 5.0 by day twenty-one.

Immediately I contacted my professor who told me not to call anyone else. We reported it directly to the highest ranking person we could find at the CDC. That was our mistake. They told us that such information, if unfounded, could cause a global panic. They told us that it wasn't possible that his blood could be acting like this and he still be walking upright, but we saw it. They told us we weren't to contact anyone else on the matter. I returned home to find my apartment ransacked, my computers gone, everything I'd taken to the CDC was gone. I keep a hidden hard drive under my bed that stored basically everything as a backup, and even this had been fried. My email accounts had all been hacked and wiped, and I basically had to start over my master's thesis.

I've done so by taking a look at cases resembling hemorrhagic fever outside of Africa. I noticed a trend in a few developed countries, mostly in Asia and Russia, but before I got too far I was shut down again when I thought I found a case in North America. It looked like a Canadian bush pilot had come down with something resembling Ebola after flying a man from a remote area in the Yukon into Yellowknife. Another bush pilot from Alaska had died in a similar manner, but he'd been in the field so no samples had been taken and the body had been unceremoniously burned to prevent spread. This

was as far as I got before I was attacked by two large men and robbed at gunpoint. Again, I lost everything. I returned to my apartment to find the door kicked in and my newly purchased laptop gone. That evening I was informed via a close friend that my professor, the one I'd been working with, had died of a heart attack during an attempted robbery. I couldn't even go to the funeral because he had no living relatives, and his body was taken by the CDC owing to his close proximity to the virus…even though that wasn't what killed him.

I know I should stop, twice in three days I lost basically everything of value that I owned, but the man the pilots had given a ride matched the description to a "T," right down to the blood-red eyes. The CDC and WHO are afraid of a global panic because Ebola has no cure; it's the perfect humanity killer. If an outbreak hit the United States it could take 60-80% of the population within weeks, months at best, and even with all the healthcare we have…there's nothing we could do to stop it.

They don't think it'd be possible for this disease to spread to North America…I think it's already here.

Part 2

It's here.

I don't know why they brought it here, but they did. Dr. Kent Brantly, along with a missionary, became infected with the Ebola virus while treating patients in West Africa, despite the fact that they took the utmost precautions against the infection. They followed every protocol in their treatment. They never came into any sort of skin on skin contact with patients, properly disinfected or discarded hazmat suits, and were monitored daily. Suddenly both began to show antibodies in their blood. No one expected the staff to become infected; the risk was always there, but such extreme measures were taken to prevent such an event that it was nearly a statistical impossibility. The only real way that the infection should've been possible was if the virus had somehow become airborne. That's the main weakness of Ebola; it needs bodily fluid to transmit. Sweat, tears, semen, blood and mucus are all common ways that Ebola spreads, but this time it seems different. People are getting sick when they shouldn't be.

I watched in horror as "Dr. Brantly" walked into the hospital on TV. I don't know who or what that was in the hazmat suit that walked through the doors of the Emory University hospital in Atlanta…but it wasn't Dr. Brantly; no one with Ebola would be allowed that sort of freedom of movement. If his suit were to tear on the ground and somehow a small bit of contaminant leaked out he could infect countless others before they had any idea what had happened.

I did one of my previous internships at Emory, and have several friends who still work there. Some of them just quit with good reason. There's a room under an incredible amount of protection, air in is monitored versus air out, the lighting in the room is controlled based on what can kill off infection, and the staff allowed into the room is so restricted that even if someone coded inside the crash cart would still have to have someone buzz them through the doors. That someone would be, from what I can tell, a heavily armed, highly trained officer of some sort.

I spent last week working my way into the hospital. My courses through the University allow me access to certain areas, and, due to my area of study I was granted access to that wing of the hospital despite the events that have already transpired. I was both terrified and elated at the same time. The pass that I had wouldn't get me access to the room, but it did allow me to analyze the data taken from other patients in Monrovia. I wasn't allowed to do anything with the actual samples as they'd all been disposed of in safe containers and were sent to a secure location offsite to be incinerated. The data, however, was mine for the taking.

I poured over the infection and was startled to find that, unlike the 2012 outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo the current strand seemed to take less time on average for symptoms to manifest. The infection could still take the entire three weeks to take hold, but many patients were showing antibodies in less than a week from their supposed exposure to the virus. While this does mean that carriers have less time to expose others to Ebola, it also means that it's becoming more efficient.

While in the lab at the hospital I noticed a strange smallish looking man. He had very dark skin and looked eerily familiar. He was wearing the garb of a surgeon. He would come and go through the secure doors on a regular basis and never seemed to interact with anyone. I could only ever see his eyes because of the protective gear and mask filter he wore. But his eyes shook me to the core. It had to be the same face. I was sure of it. He made eye contact with me once or twice and I could see his

expression was the same fiery passion that I saw in Guinea.

I tried to find out who he was. I expected to find no data whatsoever on the good doctor, but, to my surprise, he was very well documented. His name is Dr. Wilson. His ID checks out, and he bears a startling resemblance to the man I knew as Dr. Akachi, but as best as I can tell he is a normal doctor. He grew up outside of Orlando Florida and went to med school right here in Atlanta. Something still seemed odd about him, however. I began to snoop…well, maybe stalk is a better word, but I was both curious and terrified at this point, and the last time I raised a big stink about something…it didn't end well.

First I began to focus on the outbreak; I was looking for cases of illness that looked similar to Ebola but had been diagnosed as something entirely different. I started with people who'd reported recent travel to Africa in any way, shape or form. After finding more than a few cases of malaria I decided to switch gears; I looked specifically into GI disorders. One of the hallmarks of Ebola is intestinal distress and bleeding. A few unlikely hits came up; a teenager with a rare bowel disorder that had been diagnosed since birth had recently passed away, a middle school teacher with a perforated bowel who had suffered through two horrible infections before succumbing to the third, and a sanitation worker for a waste disposal firm contracted by Emory University Hospital who'd recently died of complications related to Crohn's Disease. This one caught my attention.

I began to look into the file on the man. It had been flagged by the CDC in their watch for symptomatic individuals, but the man had no risk factors for Ebola and had a known preexisting condition that led to frequent bowel bleeds. The thing that caught my eye was how minor it was prior to his death. He reportedly suffered from one to three attacks per year for the first fifty years of his life, and then suddenly has two major episodes in less than one week. He was also an alcoholic and had the liver of someone in their 80's, doing himself no favors. He was not tested for Ebola as there are only a few facilities nationwide that can safely handle a sample for testing, and he was not deemed sufficiently at risk for the virus. The middle school teacher had actually been tested as she had a relative who had recently returned from a vacation in Africa that included a jungle safari in the Congolese rainforest. Her results were negative.

I went over the known data on the sanitation worker. I mentally began to refer to him as US patient three as he was possibly the third US Ebola victim, and possibly the first US fatality. P3 was asymptomatic until August 3, 2014. He was dead less than three full days later on the morning I discovered his case. This is an incredibly quick turnaround; two days for infection and three days for death, assuming his infection is related to Dr. Brantly, and is usually indicative of a very direct contact with either blood or some other bodily fluid in great quantities. I could find no other link to the Ebola virus or Africa in any sense. I had to assume that he'd somehow been infected by Dr. Brantly's return to the US. That's when I switched back to the doctor.

Dr. "Wilson" stuck to a strict schedule. I discovered that he deviated from his schedule every Thursday. I decided that had to be it. That was when Wilson became Akachi. I also noted that, although he was a very on the record person, his time-clock would occasionally be off by an hour or so. This information was given to me by a very helpful nurse whom I may or may not know on a personal level and who shall remain very nameless.

I tailed him last Thursday; he didn't clock out when he left, and I was hoping that he'd stick to his normal routine and lead me to…I don't know. I have no idea what I expected. The villages of Guinea?

Medical tents set up with small cots containing the withering bodies of already doomed patients suffering from the end stages of Ebola maybe? I wasn't sure, but I can say for certain that whatever I was expecting…I was wrong.

He drove into a very sketchy part of town that held mainly abandoned warehouses. I followed as discretely as I possibly could, and at one point had to make an interesting serious of turns, of very questionable legality, to look like I was going a different direction while still managing to follow his jet black BMW. Finally he pulled up next to a large warehouse that looked to be at least fifty years old and in a state of severe disrepair. It was nearly dark outside and I followed on foot at the closest distance I thought I could manage without being made. I almost lost him when he stepped down a series of stairs leading into a club beneath one of the warehouses.

I realized something was off as the neon sign buzzed in the evening air. I paid the ten dollar cover and, sure enough, there was Dr. Wilson, sitting in a far corner of the club, with his very scantily clad mistress draping herself seductively across him. I planned on having a few beers to watch just to make sure, but before I'd finished the first they'd both gone to the ladies bathroom, not very discretely, and returned in various stages of undress a few minutes later. I had uncovered that the good doctor…was having an affair…not planting the Ebola virus in the nation's water supply or some more sinister act.

I returned home, twenty dollars poorer, and out of ideas. It was late and I immediately decided to just go to bed; I was scheduled to meet with one of my new professors at the hospital in the morning. I calmly entered my apartment and sat my things down in their usual spots, but something seemed off. It was hard to describe at first, but it seemed like things weren't exactly where I left them. I just had a feeling at first, until I entered my bathroom and saw my toothbrush in the actual holder. That was a carryover from when my ex moved in with me before she decided that bodybuilders were hotter than book nerds and left me high and dry. I hadn't put my toothbrush anywhere but lying on the counter for at least a year. Suddenly it was in the holder.

I grabbed a bat, because I'm too cheap to own a gun and apparently a steak knife from the kitchen didn't make sense at the time, and began to search for an intruder. Last time they just destroyed everything I owned basically, so why they were so sneaky this time completely baffled me. After a VERY thorough inspection that included randomly throwing back dark curtains and dropping to the floor to quickly look under furniture, I determined that I was indeed alone in my small apartment.

I wasn't entirely calm, so as I finally collapsed into bed I leaned the baseball bat against my nightstand just in case. I had just dozed off when I heard someone talking. Instantly I was awake. Like a baby giraffe taking his first awkward steps into the world I leaped from the bed, grabbed my bat and fell quickly to the floor in what can only be described as a belly flop onto carpet. I could clearly hear someone talking in my kitchen. I wasn't sure who or what they were talking about but they were there. It sounded like English, but I could pick out a distinct British accent.

With the grace and poise of James Bond, if he had indulged in a few too many martinis (shaken, not stirred), I used my iPhone camera to show me what was around the corner to my small kitchen without actually poking my head out. I could see a small man in a lab coat seated at the table, staring directly at my outstretched hand. I quickly took a photo and pulled the phone back. The photo showed nothing, except that there was now something lying on the table.

As I tried to figure out what it was I was startled by a noise in the attic. It's a squirrel. I know it's a

squirrel, because he's been there for weeks, probably eating my insulation and chewing on wires while the complex refuses to do anything about him. At the time, however, it might as well have been Beelzebub himself. I immediately jumped around the corner and realized that I was now completely exposed. Only, there was indeed no one sitting at my table. There was a small slip of paper. Written in jet black ink were the words "Worry not from whence it comes, but rather for where it goes." I had nothing. Google turned up nothing, my common sense turned up nothing, and I had nowhere else to look. And so I slept. Clutching my Louisville slugger. Sitting in my recliner. With every light on.

In the morning I woke to the sound of hail beating on my windows. The paper was gone; I'd folded it into quarters and placed it in my pocket, but somehow it was still gone. I thought maybe I'd dreamed the entire episode until I remembered the toothbrush and the bat, the latter of which I was still holding. More eager than ever to leave my apartment I quickly got ready to meet my new professor at the hospital.

He drove up in a pale tan Dodge Ram that was probably older than me, and looked like a mountain man through and through. Only when I heard him talk did I realize how incredibly intelligent he actually was. His knowledge of virology was incredible; he actually taught my former professor, the one who had passed away, and had made his mark on the Ebola virus as well; his serum was currently being used to treat the two Americans who'd become infected. Well, it wasn't his specifically, but without his work it would be several more months before the serum would've even been ready for an experimental treatment, let alone two cases.

He was the kindest, grandfather-like person I'd ever had the chance to meet, and explained to me the steps I'd need to take to graduate more clearly than anyone had in the past. Even though I knew pretty well where I was headed, it was nice to hear it from someone with authority; he was the graduate advisor for my university for thirty years before entering semi-retirement. As we were finishing our coffee and about to part ways he looked me dead in the eye and said "It's good to know where you're going. Take care." He walked away and I couldn't help but think of the message I'd been left.

Back to the lab I went. The doctor in charge of the lab was a stern looking man in his late fifties. He had the look on his face that said he'd done some things, and seen some stuff in his years, and he made sure that policies in the lab were followed to a "T" regardless of the circumstance. Today… something happened. One of the hazard bins slated for incineration was left in the "clean" hallway between the patient's room and the lab. The doctor had a fit. He fired the tech responsible for the error on the spot. I believe he realized how hot-headed of a mistake this was when he found that no one else in the lab had the credentials and experience to take a bin of highly contaminated sheets, clothes, and other articles, down for incineration. I did, so I volunteered. After a quick, but thorough interrogation he had me suited up and ready to go in minutes.

I'd done the same sort of work back in Africa, so it didn't seem like much to me. I was happy to earn brownie points with the doctor, and I needed a break anyways. Once down in the secure disposal pickup area I waited for the truck. It was scheduled to arrive any minute; hence the irate reaction on the part of the doctor. After a brief wait the red light finally lit up and the doors opened revealing a small, but secure looking delivery truck. It had enough room for four or five such bins in the rear, but there was only one; mine.

The driver stepped out wearing a protective suit very similar to my own, and took the forms to sign. He asked where the regular tech was and I, while trying not to bash the guy, informed him that he'd

been let go. The driver grimaced and nodded as he took the paperwork to his truck. His passenger got out to take the bin. As he wheeled it away I turned around to leave when I realized that I was missing one signature. I ran to the driver before they left and he apologized, signing it while sitting in the truck. As he did so the passenger reentered the vehicle. I got a look at him through the suit. My heart stopped. I had no pulse for a few seconds; I'm sure of it. The man showed me the same weary smile that was on his face in the medical tents in Guinea. His eyes were bloodshot and bright red. The driver handed me the forms, shut the door and drove away before I could utter a word.

Through my research I knew which hazardous waste disposal firm was contracted by the hospital. I had to follow procedure or I'd be at risk for infection, so I quickly changed out of my suit and properly disposed of it. I showered off and told the doctor in charge that I was going to lunch. He nodded, looked at his watch, probably thought "10:45 is a little early, but sure, your call," and I almost sprinted to my car. On the way to the waste disposal plant I hit 95 on the freeway…attracting the attention of a state trooper who I'd barely had time to see. I quickly got off on the next exit around a bend. I only had time to see him turn onto the interstate before the exit came up. I'm sure he got me, but he either didn't see me exit, or decided that there were bigger fish to fry.

I actually caught up to the truck at a railroad crossing; apparently mile-long freight trains are good for something. The truck was the first car and I was about thirty cars behind it, but I could see it. Once the train passed the crossing I weaved in and out of traffic as best as I could to keep pace with the truck. Finally I saw them turn down the road to the disposal plant. Only…it wasn't the main entrance; it was a dirt access road that was probably only used for maintenance. There was no way for me to follow directly without being seen. There was no gate, which was probably a breach of some sort of security protocol seeing as how they were disposing of hazardous materials onsite, so I waited a few minutes then tried to be as discreet as possible as I drove down the road…throwing up a massive cloud of dust in my wake. There was nowhere to turn around; the left side of the road abutted a pond of some sorts and the right side was thickly overgrown with trees and other vegetation, so I came up with the "I was lost and couldn't turn around" excuse in case I was stopped.

At the end of the road was a small garage. I parked next to it and looked around for the truck. There were tracks leading inside but I couldn't tell whether or not they were from today. There was only one window that I could see but it was about eight feet in the air so I had to pull my car over and stand on the roof to see inside. The truck was inside and the rear doors were open. There was what looked like a freight elevator and then nothing else. Suddenly there was a dull thud inside and the room began to fill with fog and droplets began to form on the window glass. Before it completely filled the room I was already back in my car tearing down the dirt road. I didn't know what happened, but if there was any sort of explosion involving the incineration of Ebola tainted refuse I wanted to be anywhere but there. I briefly thought of alerting the hospital, but…like I said…alerting the proper authorities didn't go so well for me last time, so I returned to the hospital for the rest of my day. I didn't know what else to do.

Back in the lab I found that my new professor had taken over a small ring of students and was giving what appeared to be an impromptu lecture on the virus. He was reassuring some of the more skittish students that an outbreak in a more developed country, such as America, would be less devastating because we have better quarantine protocols, more sterile conditions, a more reliable blood supply, and, chiefly, Ebola is spread via direct contact; we know that and can avoid it in treatment much

better than someone with no medical knowledge treating a sick relative. I listened in, but was too preoccupied with what I'd just seen to really absorb any of the information.

Afterwards, he pulled me aside and noted that I looked like my mind was somewhere else. I answered that I'd just found out one of my cousins had been in a car accident over the weekend. That wasn't entirely untrue; my cousin was involved in a fender bender the previous Sunday causing her to fracture her foot in three places. He looked at me briefly and seemed about to leave it go until he spoke again.

"I know where you went." He said simply.

"What do you mean?" I replied shakily.

"It doesn't last as long in the form of mist, but it's just as effective. I hope, for your sake, that you were outside when it happened. Wouldn't want to start a panic now would we?" He answered as he turned and slowly walked away. He seemed almost apologetic about it.

My heart stopped for the second time that day. I immediately took a full decontamination shower and went home. As part of the program our blood was periodically tested to ensure that there were no contaminants escaping the secure confines. I quickly drew and tested my own blood using one of the kits. It came back negative. I've taken a personal break from school; my classes don't start for another three weeks in the fall. I have myself quarantined at home with enough food and water to last another month or so. This happened last Friday. I have just over two weeks left to be sure.

Part 3

Three weeks is a long time. I nearly left my self-imposed quarantine on more than one occasion only to self-guilt myself into staying home. If I was sick they'd find me…dead or alive…but I wasn't going to spread it. Was that what they wanted? I don't really know anymore, and, to be brutally honest, I almost scared myself out of it. I was done. Three weeks; my second quarantine since June, always worrying that a cough might turn into so much more, and it never did. But…like a Netflix junkie going to watch "just one more episode" I came crawling back. I've made a mistake.

As soon as I was sure that three full weeks had passed I left my apartment. I went to the store, got some food, drove around for a bit, enjoyed a short walk, and had a serious "come to Jesus" with myself over what I was doing. I was going to kill myself. Not intentionally mind you, but I was seriously afraid that if I continued along the pathway I was headed…I've seen what Ebola does to people. I've seen what it can do to those who survive the virus. So I made the decision to change; I was going to go to the hospital, get my stuff, leave, and not return. The only work I'd been doing was strictly extracurricular and or preparation for my thesis. I could do that from home or from the university.

I arrived at the hospital to a host of new faces. I recognized almost no one. Those who I did recognize looked at me with a face that I can only describe as fear. It was odd; I felt like everyone was watching my every move. I couldn't determine why until I checked with one of the nurses who'd helped me out so many weeks ago. She said that I looked like death. My heart stopped for a second. She said I looked famished, like my clothes were wearing me, and like I'd been starving myself for a few weeks. My heart began to beat again. I weighed myself, and sure enough, I'd lost nearly twenty pounds in three weeks. I was gaunt. I guess I hadn't noticed my appearance because I either hadn't looked at myself closely in the mirror for the three weeks I'd been holed up, or I changed slowly enough that I didn't catch it.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and nearly hit the ceiling. It was one of the doctors in charge of the lab.

"We missed you…were you sick?" He asked looking somewhat skeptical. I can't really blame him; I looked like crap. "Step over here for me…we're gonna take your temperature." I was, at this point, more than sure that I wasn't running a fever, so I readily agreed. His next statement, however, surprised me. "Ok, you're good, 98.7. Hey, stop by my office before you hit the lab; need to catch you up a bit."

The hospital has introduced the body scanners that can measure temperature via thermal imaging. It reduces the risk of a hospital worker coming in contact with someone sick just to take their temperature. I headed for the doctor's office and wondered what he wanted to catch me up on. I should've just gone home.

They needed more volunteers in Africa. The situation had gotten exponentially worse during my self-imposed quarantine, and they needed anyone and everyone they could get. I already had experience in giving medical assistance overseas so I was a candidate right off the bat…but no one could contact me. I answered zero emails, phone calls, or the door except to say that I wasn't feeling well if someone knocked. Every fiber of my being said "no." My mouth very nearly did too until some very small voice in the back of my head said "go." It was quiet at first but it got louder and louder, and before I could resist…I agreed to make the trip. Due to the number of professors involved in the

outbreak my fall classes were temporarily postponed and credit was offered for participation in the relief effort. I left on August 31 for Liberia.

With over 1,300 confirmed cases and over 600 deaths, Liberia, at that point, had been hit the hardest, although Guinea and Sierra Leone aren't too far behind. One of the scariest clusters, however, is still rather unknown. A doctor who'd treated patients in the first outbreak in Nigeria died in late August after traveling to another city and possibly exposing hundreds to the virus. Quarantine protocols aren't nearly as strict in Africa in some places…and they aren't always followed, even when the WHO takes a direct interest. If a man comes to the hospital wielding an AK-47 and telling you to release his sick daughter…it's hard to say "no." The number of infected is already doubling roughly every month, and reports have been slowly trickling in confirming the worst case scenario in Nigeria.

I was to be in much the same role I was last time; analyzing the virus, testing patients for possible infection, and confirming infection both before and after death to track the spread and source of the disease. As best as modern science can tell, this particular outbreak began at a funeral. Two different strands happened to converge at the same time and started an epidemic that has claimed over 1,500 lives. Before the end of the first day I was back in my routine. I had confirmed a handful of new cases and actually confirmed that a few lucky individuals had a different ailment such as malaria and yellow fever…if that can be called luck.

I quietly performed my duties for a few weeks as though in a trance; I was there because I knew I was needed. Finally I began to feel more like my old self; I started to almost enjoy what I was doing…and my curiosity returned. I was perplexed that the entire plague had originated at one funeral, from two different strands nonetheless. This massive epidemic was brought on by the death of a young boy. The first strain seemed to be from eating contaminated bat meat. This wasn't uncommon in the area, eating bats, but the second strain was more ambiguous. It seemed to originate from a person. This was somewhat unusual as people generally can't be carriers of Ebola without showing symptoms. Bats are able to carry the disease without becoming ill. The RNA of the second Ebola strand indicated that the carrier was a primate, and almost certainly a human rather than a gorilla or some other hominid. Intrigued, I began to dig further.

Most of the people that attended that fateful funeral, more of a burial ceremony actually, have long since passed, but there were a few survivors who'd beaten the virus and lived to give tissue samples afterwards. These showed an unusual cellular structure, as if the person was still somehow a carrier long after their initial infection had passed. When I began to look deeper into the family history I discovered that the family, unlike most in the area, could trace their ancestry back for centuries, millennia even. I was thinking that maybe the survivors had some sort of gene that gave them a resistance to the virus or enabled them to have a higher chance of survival. The adventurous part of me began to light up with the possibilities of developing a vaccine, or even a cure for Ebola.

I requested samples from three tents that had patients similar in profile to those who survived the initial infection at the funeral. I've made better choices. The next day I was leaving my med tent when a small girl ran up to me yelling "here he is!" I have no idea who the girl was or how she knew me, but the next thing I knew three large men, one holding an antiquated rifle, calmly asked me to accompany them. One of their family members was ill. This sort of thing wasn't uncommon; they generally didn't have rifles, but more often than not one of the team would go out to a village and find an entire new area of infection, often adding hundreds of cases to the list. I politely asked to grab my

gear first but was herded into the back of an old jeep before I had a chance to argue.

We have protocols in place for this; many of the people living here don't completely comprehend how the virus spreads. Sometimes they are terrified and just grab a doctor or technician before they completely understand the gravity of the situation. I tried to act as calm as possible…I'm not a doctor…just an aid worker; I can't touch patients…nor would I want to. I expected to find a hut with one or two gravely ill people on death's doorstep and a few other who had obviously contracted the virus as well. I would've been lucky.

The jeep rolled up to a group of huts and the man pointed the rifle at me. I calmly stepped from the jeep and the moment my foot hit the ground the jeep started to pull away. One of them shouted "They are yours now; may God save you." We'd been traveling for at least half an hour through winding hilly terrain, I didn't have my phone on me, I had no watch, and only my work ID badge. We weren't allowed to keep much in our pockets when coming from or going to the med tents, so I tended to unload them in my personal tent. I regretted that habit. I knew I was probably twenty miles from our base, and that my only real way back was to hope that one of the villagers could help me.

I waited a minute or two to see if anyone would come out. Usually in far out places such as this a vehicle meant some sort of delivery or at least a traveler passing through. People generally flocked out to meet the person or to get a glimpse of something they'd never seen before. Nothing. I called out to the huts, first in English, then in the bit of native tongue common to the area. I don't know much but "hello," "greetings," and "where is the bathroom?" seemed like good things to learn so I made them a priority before I left the US. Still no one emerged from the huts.

I tentatively walked closer to one of the mud and straw dwellings. It looked fairly well constructed, but it seemed to be in a state of disrepair; the rain could cause some of the mud to run and would require attention after a strong storm. This hut looked as though it hadn't been tended to in some time. I peered in the open window and quickly drew myself back. Three corpses lay on the ground just inside the main opening to the hut. They had been dead for at least a week or so, judging by the state of decomposition, and I wasn't about to get in closer for a better look. Searching a dozen or so more huts, I found more of the same; several corpses, some slightly fresher than others, all seemingly ravaged by the Ebola virus.

It was then that I realized how intensely quiet everything had become. The jeep was so far in the distance that I couldn't even make out its dust trail anymore, and the sound had long since died off. I briefly debated trying to walk back…but that would likely take several hours and I wasn't about to spend an evening on a dirt road in Liberia. I may as well have been stranded on a desert island. The only thing I could think about was the fact that I doubted anyone saw me leave. I was on the back side of the camp when the jeep arrived, and it's on the opposite end of a small hill. If anyone had been by the river they may have seen something, but I didn't recall seeing anyone there as we sped off.

While I went through all of the worst case scenarios in my head I was meandering back to where I'd been dropped off. As I was nearly there I thought I heard something. Maybe it was my mind playing tricks on me, maybe it was the wind, maybe it was something else entirely, but it sounded like very light footsteps. If there was someone still alive here they might be able to help me get back. I immediately turned and tried to follow the sound to its source. I followed the noise to the center of the village but, initially, found no one.

Despondent I had nearly resigned myself to walking home when I saw someone. It was just a glimpse,

but I saw a person slink behind one of the huts as soon as I looked in their direction. I quickly ran towards them, with complete disregard for the fact that any living individual remaining in this village was likely infected with the Ebola virus. I stepped into a small clearing where four huts shared a small "yard" and realized that whoever I was chasing had successfully lost me. I stood in the center of the four huts for a moment and turned to walk back towards where I had started. As I did a figure appeared in one of the doors as I walked past. It was tall, and towered over me by about half a foot. I quickly stepped back but whoever it was stepped out towards me. There were boils and lesions on his face, he had at least two or three visible gunshot wounds to his chest, and his eyes were blood red. I began to run almost at once.

I stepped past a handful of individuals who had also decided to suddenly come to their doors. Some were missing limbs, some had visible injuries, some merely looked bloated from decomposition…but they all had those blood red eyes. I ran until I came to the edge of the village. Dusk had fallen and I had no choice but to hit the road. I knew it would take hours…and that I was less than safe walking a dirt road in Liberia by myself…but I had little choice. I began to run down the road. I knew running twenty miles just wasn't going to happen but I had to distance myself from…whatever was back there.

Something was following me. I could see in the darkness that something was about fifty yards or so behind me. It would gain ground every now and then and I would run a little harder. Suddenly I had the wind knocked out of me as something rammed into my chest. As I focused on my pursuer I failed to notice that something had been following beside me as well. I rolled once and kicked my feet out at the snarling mass of fur that had been trying to bite through my jacket. I rolled to a side and kicked as hard as I could. Never did I think it would actually work but I connected directly with the head of the animal which I saw to be a rather large hyena. I must've either seriously hurt it or scared it because it tore off running towards whatever had been chasing me in the first place as I scrambled to my feet. Seconds later I heard a shrill howl cut eerily short.

I hadn't been running for more than ten or fifteen minutes but I was exhausted, drenched in sweat and ready to give up. I could hear the ragged noises of something chasing me still. Not the breath; I never heard that over my own, but the uneven steps that seemed to be too rapid to be normal running, the scraping sounds when its feet slid on the dirt, and the soft sort of…"squish" sound it made with every step. I knew I'd exhausted the majority of my adrenaline and that was all that was keeping me going. As I rounded a sharp bend in the road I stumbled on what I thought was a root…only to be dragged into the complete darkness on the side of the road.

A young boy of maybe eight years old held his hand over his making the "shhh" gesture…this was a moot point; I could hardly breathe after running for so long and after hitting the dirt so hard when I fell. The thing ran past. It seemed confused and it slowed for a few seconds; or at least the squishing noise slowed, but then it continued on with renewed vigor after a moment. The boy was maybe eight years old and completely alone. I tried to ask him a question, but after a moment it became apparent that the language barrier was going to be impossible to overcome. He motioned for me to follow him. He didn't appear to be infected…though one can never tell…and he'd already touched my leg when he pulled me to safety. I'd burn the jeans when I got back…if I got back.

We walked for some time in silence through intensely thick cover. Occasionally I'd hear something around us and we'd pause, my guide would remain deathly motionless, and after a short period of time we'd begin to move again. The hair on the back of my neck had been standing on end for so long

that it was beginning to give me a headache. Hours passed, and finally the dense brush began to clear up a bit. We emerged at the top of a large hill in the predawn mist. I figured we had to be close to my home base guessing by the general direction that we'd traveled, but I couldn't be certain.

He pointed into a valley that was covered in a pale fog. I couldn't see anything except that the sun was about to rise from behind the hill on which we stood. After a moment I started to make out shapes in the distance. They looked like mounds. I began to realize that I was looking at more huts; this was another village…only it was larger, much larger, than the previous one. It looked as though there might have been a hundred thousand people living in this absolutely massive valley. This would be an immense village by any standards, but even more so that the houses were all constructed of mud and straw.

Then it dawned on me; I couldn't see a single person. Usually these villages were bustling with people, even if they were sick the villagers couldn't afford to just stay in bed; they needed to tend the crops, catch fish, and bring home dinner. That's how Ebola spreads so readily in these types of places. I looked towards the boy. He could tell that I knew what I was seeing. There were likely one hundred thousand dead here. The death toll from the current Ebola outbreak was grossly under-reported…that was a known fact, but this was apocalyptic.

The boy pointed east and said something that made me believe that was where we were heading and he merely stood there. I absentmindedly asked if he was coming with me. Despite the fact that he didn't speak any English, to my knowledge, he shook his head no and began to head into the valley. He bounded down the steep hillside and towards the village. Once he reached the valley floor I watched him run towards the huts. One by one they emerged from the doorways, some staggering some lunging. The boy was fast…I don't know what he was doing…or why he did it…but he was running through the main corridor of the village and…they were coming out of their huts, the diseased…possibly dead…victims of a horrific virus that was spreading uncontrolled. Finally he faltered; one of the faster ones grabbed his arm and violently ripped him to the ground. He was pulled in two several separate directions until I could see him no more. I was dumbfounded. Then I saw them start moving towards the hill…and up it.

A sudden crash behind me shook me from my thoughts and I was running again in a second. There was something charging through the thick undergrowth right at me. It wasn't moving like an animal; it seemed to be just charging wildly. I ducked into the thick brush but quickly found myself hopelessly mired in a tangle of vines and almost found it easier to climb over the vegetation. Once I was a few feet off of the ground I was actually able to move with relative ease. Suddenly my legs gave out and I was falling. Much further than I should've been falling…considering I was only a few feet off of the ground. The world spun then faded to black.

I woke on the ground by a stream. I was at our base. I staggered into camp and was immediately gathered up by two of my colleagues. They didn't say much except to ask what the hell had happened and where had I been. I changed and assured everyone that I was indeed still alive before heading to my tent to "sleep." I was exhausted, but I hardly slept at all…and when I did it was nightmarish. I had visions of the dead coming to life and pursuing me. I told my boss what I'd seen and he informed me that I had to have imagined it; the neighboring villages had all sent representatives to say that they were free of infection just a few days ago. I told him I thought he should check again. I was offered the chance to go home as I'd been out of physical contact with confirmed patients for longer than the

minimum twenty-one days. I accepted. I've made better decisions.

During the flight back last night I heard a myriad of people coughing, sneezing, and occasionally vomiting into air sickness bags; unsettling doesn't accurately describe the scenario. I stayed in my seat and thanked my lucky stars that no one else sat in my row; the plane was relatively empty. It was an incredibly long flight with three layovers, but finally we landed in Atlanta. I stood to leave and realized that I was the only person getting off. I didn't think that incredibly unusual until I realized how quiet the plane had become. The entire flight over I heard people coughing and hacking but now everyone was silent. I stared back the rows and that's when I saw it. Their eyes; all of them were blood red. I immediately disembarked the plane and headed for home.

I did a quick look of where the flight was going and as best I could tell it was bound for New York, departing mere minutes after I disembarked. As far as I can tell it arrived and never left for its next destination which was, again, Liberia. The toll is now over 6,400, with an estimated 2,500 deaths. Liberia is still the hardest hit. There are currently "four" confirmed US citizens who have contracted Ebola. That number, like the other, is greatly underreported. They won't show the true number until it's far too late.

Today I received an envelope in the mail. It contained two pictures taken with a Polaroid camera, the first of which showed my old home base in Liberia. It was deserted. Only one figure stood in the center of the picture. It was the small boy who'd helped me on the road. He now looked vastly different and slightly slumped to one side. It was hard to tell, but his eyes looked completely red. The back was scrawled on in pen and looked very hastily written.

"What have you done to us? What have you brought to us?"

The second picture was of a small wooden box laid on the ground with a small boy in it. He had ferns and paintings around his head. I immediately recognized this as a burial ceremony. In the picture there was a woman, presumably the boy's mother, kissing him on the forehead. This is a custom at many African burial ceremonies. As Ebola is most transmissible immediately after death this part of the burial is the easiest way Ebola has spread unchecked for so long. I looked on the back and the date read "Dec – 2013" written in English. There were initials written on the bottom right hand corner as well.

Was I looking at patient zero? Then it hit me. In the background of the picture I saw several people standing around. Cameras are rare in undeveloped regions, and most don't know how to react to the flash or to even having their photograph taken. Standing beside a tall, somewhat elderly man, was a young boy, maybe eight years old, and the very same one who had helped me on the road. Only this picture showed him differently than I remember; his eyes were blood red just like in the picture from my old, now abandoned, medical camp. It was then that I realized that the initials were the same as those of my old professor. The man who has since passed away…was the very same person who took this picture nearly a year ago.

August 2014

AUGUST

That Wasn't My Husband Who Slept Next to Me Last Night

by TorontoScared1

Winner - August Monthly Contest

Part 1

My name is Peter Tillman, and I'm terrified. I am a physicist here in Toronto and teach at one of the best Universities in Canada. I've had a very successful career and have been offered tenure, which I'm still debating. I was very luck to be born into a very wealthy family and met the man of my dreams about 8 years ago in my early 20s. We've been married for approximately 5 years, and he's my everything.

He makes me laugh, he makes me smile, he sometimes makes me cry (who doesn't have that story to tell about their partner), and he's my partner in crime. The man that came home to me yesterday is not my husband, and I have no idea what's going on.

Christopher (my husband), left for a business trip five days ago. He's a patent lawyer and occasionally has to travel for work. He left Pearson international airport and called me when he landed at Wein-Flughafen (Vienna's main airport). I have a bit of separation anxiety when it comes to being away from him, and he has no problem catering to this. He called me after he got through customs, and when he got to the hotel. Nothing long, just a "hey honey, I'm here" kinda call. We always preferred phone calls since we text with everyone else and decided that calling would be our thing.

I went about the last four days as I usually would: doing chores, teaching the couple summer courses that I've been unfortunately assigned, and picking out new colours for the kitchen. His mum is footing the bill for the renovations, so why not. It's her anniversary present to us.

Yesterday Christopher was scheduled to fly back to Toronto. He called me from Vienna after he got into the lounge at the airport and told me that he was super tired and was going to pass out on the plane. I was happy that he was finally going to get some rest after what sounded like an atrociously busy trip. Poor guy, he works so hard.

His flight was scheduled to arrive at 11pm, and I had an early class to teach today, so I decided to make dinner and leave it in the fridge for him, and then curl up with the poorly written physics textbook that I was editing for a friend. I realized that 11pm had come and gone and I didn't get word from Christopher, but I just assumed that his flight was delayed. He had a layover in London at Heathrow Airport, and I know that they have some pretty brilliant thunderstorms this time of year, so I just figured that his flight was delayed. When 12pm rolled around, I started to get a bit more worried, but then all of my feelings were allayed. I got a text. I know that Christopher was tired, and that he usually doesn't sleep well on flights, so I assumed that he just wanted to reassure me, that's why he texted, instead of calling.

He said: Jweust Landod, will be hom sune.

Poor guy was so tired, he couldn't even type straight. I even got him a new iPhone for his birthday and assumed that he was still having trouble adapting to the touchscreen having been a loyal blackberry fan for so many years.

I went to the bathroom, took out my contacts and fell asleep. I don't know how long after receiving that text I fell asleep, but I was out cold. A few hours later I heard the latch turn, and I heard Chris's usually heavy footsteps climb up the stairs. He went to the bathroom, and did his usual routine, except he left the water running. I thought that was a bit strange. He's usually VERY particular about turning off the taps so as to not waste water, not because of the bills, but because of the whole environmentalism kick that he'd been on for the past couple of years.

I was drifting in and out of sleep, but I wanted to see him before I fully passed out. He came into the room, and something seemed different. Nothing that scared me, but just seemed off.

I have terrible vision and my glasses were not near the bed since I normally wore contacts. I looked over and his upper lip looked swollen, like if he had been stung by a bee, and I could see a lot more gum and teeth than normal and had a very broad smile...like he missed me and was glad to see me. I asked him, "babe, are you ok, what's up with your lip?" He quickly told me not to worry, and it was just chapped from being on the plane. I agreed and still half asleep drifted off again.

About 2 hours later I rolled over and noticed that Chris' back was towards me, whatever. Nothing strange. That's when I put my arm around him. He felt....thicker. That's the only way to describe it. I know what my man feels like, and he just felt like a thicker/broader version of him. My general level of unease was starting to get stronger at this point but still not being fully awake, I just chalked it up to nothing.

This morning I woke up and Christopher was gone. His suitcase was still there, he had changed his clothes, but he was gone. I called him, no answer. He however quickly texted me back the following

Et thhe Gym, Loft irly, wull be hume ofter ue leave.

Good I thought, maybe he could work off some of that extra weight I felt on him last night, and chuckled to myself.

I went about my regular routine, and was just about to step out the door when I saw his suitcase again. He had left it on the landing by the door and I guess he just wanted it there, so he could sort it in the living room. As I was leaving a faint musty smell hit me.

It was like if someone had left steak out in the sun for a couple hours. I was already half way out the door, so I felt like it was coming from outside, but when I turned my face towards his suitcase it got so much worse. The smell wasn't a steak being left out for a couple hours, but a couple days. It reeked. I picked up the suitcase only to realize that he had left his lock on it, and I didn't have the keys, so I moved it into the Garage, just so it was out of the house.

As I was about to get into the car, I got another text from Christopher:

i Loweve Yu, Sii you Sune.

I texted back: When you get home, check your suitcase, it stinks and the handle has some kind of residue on it.

I still found it strange that he would text.

About 10 minutes after I got into the car, my phone rang. Chris was calling me.

Me: Hello?

Chris: Hey Babe, so sorry that I didn't get a chance to call you, you must be crazy worried?

Me: Why? Are you ok?

Chris: Yeah, I've been stuck here in London, just getting onto my plane to come home, can you come meet me at the airport?

I froze, I nearly dropped the phone and almost ran my car off the road.

Me: WHAT? What do you mean you're still in London, is this a joke. That's not funny Christopher. You came home last night, I saw you, I spoke to you. Yes I'm a heavy sleeper, but don't shit around. What's going on.

Chris: Um, listen. He put his phone on speaker, and I could hear a woman in a thick english accent announcing "and Gentleman this is the final boarding call for Flight BA203 to Toronto, Could Mr. Fitzpatrick and Mr. Colridge please come to the British Airways desk on the main concourse."

I stopped the car. I was dead silent. What's going on, who did I sleep next to.

Me: Christopher, get home, I'm scared, I need to see you. Call me when you're at the airport, every thing is ok, I just need to see you.

Chris: chuckle Ok babe, calm down, I'll be home soon. I should be there by 9pm.

He chuckled because he figured my anxiety was getting the better of me. I didn't want to freak him out about what happened last night and the texts and who I had spoken to earlier on the phone.

I'm going to work now, I'm not going back to that house. I'm going to the airport as soon as I can to meet Christopher, if it really is Christopher. I don't know what's going on anymore. I'm a physicist, a man of science, and none of this makes sense to me.

I haven't been genuinely scared like this since I was a child. What's going on?

UPDATE: Final text from "Chris"

I'm aAAt home, witing for yo1u. Won will u b bock?

UPDATE 1730 EST: I just got back from the lab. Two of my colleagues want a chance to inspect the suitcase, but I'll hold out on that for now. They've done two cultures with what they were able to get from under my nails and from the palm of my left hand. They doubt they'll be able to find anything, because of how long it's been since I touched the suitcase but they'll let me know as soon as they see anything.

UPDATE 1745: Christopher messed up his arrival time, he just landed. Heading to the airport now. Told him not to leave without me.

Part 2

The good news: science seems to be a useful tool in all of this.

The bad news: it's raising more questions that it's answering.

I know a lot of you have referenced the mold stories which deal with demonic possession, but after what's happened today, I think we're dealing with something very different.

Christopher called me when he landed and I rushed to the airport. By the time that I got there he had already cleared customs and was waiting for me. He had his bag. I have never been happier and more confused to see that beat up suitcase of his which I've tried countless times to replace. When I saw him, I knew it was him. No fat lip, no odour, no unexplained weight gain. I ran to him and threw my arms around him. God I missed him. I was still weary, but the part of me that promised to love and to honour was overpowering the part of me that was absolutely terrified about what happened last night.

I rushed him to the car, and threw his suitcase in the trunk. It didn't stink and it didn't have any residue on it, and I just wanted to get back on the road to explain to him what was happening.

As we rushed down the highway, he asked me what was wrong, what could possibly have upset me to the point that I was acting like a total bag of nerves. I explained everything from the smell, to the other "Christopher" to my posting on reddit, to giving the samples at the lab. He was completely silent. Didn't say a word the entire time.

Then he turned to me and asked if I had taken acid or if I had smoked meth. I had some substance abuse problems when I was younger and Chris met me at the tail end of it all. I could see that he didn't believe a word that I was saying. I begged and pleaded with him to believe me, but he just remained silent and stared dead ahead. I could see that he was getting angrier by the moment, thinking that I was making up the entire thing.

"God dammit Peter, I'm tired, I'm jet lagged, and I've been stuck in an airport for almost a day, I don't need this shit as soon as I get back. Can we just go home, I'll take a shower, and we'll go to bed, and everything will be ok."

Absolutely not, no way in hell was I going back to the house. Or should I? I started questioning my own sanity. Maybe I did make the whole thing up nothing about the situation made sense, and I hadn't experienced any side effects from the "exposure" to whatever was on the suitcase handle. THE SUITCASE!! I moved the suitcase into the garage!! I had forgotten about it after being shattered by the way that Christopher was reacting to the situation. If we went to the house, I could show him the suitcase and he would believe me!!

I calmly turned to him, "ok, remember I told you about the suitcase? If we go back home and your suitcase is there, will you believe me?!"

I think it was mostly just lack of sleep and exhaustion, coupled with a desire to just get home that made him agree that if the suitcase was there, he would believe me.

I gunned it down that highway. 145km at one point, I didn't care. I just wanted to show him, and get the hell out of there.

I pulled into the drive and hit the garage door button on my visor, knowing, feeling, 100% convinced that I was about to be vindicated. The garage door opened up and nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The suitcase wasn't there. I ran out of the car and tore the garage apart. Maybe it had rolled

somewhere? Maybe I had forgotten where I put it. I searched for a good 5 minutes and then just turned blank faced to him. Christopher was pissed. I hadn't seen him this angry in a while.

"Peter! this isn't funny anymore. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I just want to go to sleep, get in the house and just drop it. I love you, and I'm going to take your word for it that you're clean, but don't press me."

I just stood there staring at him as he walked in the house. I didn't know what to do. Chris immediately made for the shower, we didn't even take his real suitcase out of the car, we just went into the house and I sat in the living room. Nothing felt weird or out of place, and the only smell was the faint vanilla scent from the Airwick in the wall. It was about 7pm by this point.

Chris got out of the shower and came downstairs wearing his towel. Hearing his footsteps down the stairs terrified me, I froze on the couch and was just relieved to see that he had his normal physique.

"Are you coming to bed?" He asked, the tone in his a voice much nicer and much more sweet than before. It's amazing how much good a shower can do for a man.

I saw this as my opportunity to convince him to leave the house. I pleaded with him one more time, and I could just see a look of resigned exhaustion on his face. "ok Babe, we'll go to a hotel. It'll clear your mind and maybe you'll stop being such a drama queen"

I LOVE YOU was the only thing that I blurted out before I broke down crying. I think the relief of finally convincing him to leave was vindication of the insanity that I was descending into.

He pulled on some clothes and I packed a bag, he didn't need anything because he still had clean clothes in his suitcase that was still in the trunk of the car.

We got into the car and he gave me a kiss, "man, you're high maintenance sometimes, one bad dream and you lose your shit. You're a logical person, I've never met a more staunch atheist, and you're acting like a damn ghost slept with you. Let's go to the King Edward".

It was my favourite hotel in the city, but because it was only 10 minutes away, we only went there for parties and lunch, and rarely got the chance to spend the night. The rooms are amazing.

As we drove, I started to calm down. Having Christopher back and being away from the house made me feel better. THE PHONE!! In the panic to get home and tell him everything, I forgot to show him the weird texts that I had received. I quickly took out my cell and scrolled through the texts. Nothing. No texts from him,nothing.I didn't want to tell him anything because he would just continue to think that I was losing it and I didn't want to look like a bigger fool than I had already been. I know I had sent and received those texts from him, I know I did. But frankly I just wanted to get to the hotel and unwind. Maybe I could make sense of this tomorrow.

The King Edward has a beautiful foyer dominated by an enormous oil portrait of King Edward VII. As we made our way towards the check in desk, the clerk smiled at us and said "Mr. Tillman, how was your evening? And I presume this is Dr. Tillman." She was looking at me.

Christopher and I just stood there in silence. How did she know our names, we made no reservations, and we surely didn't come there enough for her to know us by name.

"Um, I'm fine, I'm sorry, have me met?" Christopher looked at her quizzically, then turned to me.

"Oh, I, well, of course Sir, you just stepped out and told me that you were going to get your husband." Her smile had turned to a look of confusion.

Christopher just stared at me. He nor I knew what to say.

"I'm sorry gentleman, is everything ok?" The poor woman had no idea what was going on, and frankly neither did I. Chris just stood there, I could see his face change. I could see that he was starting to believe me. I could see his opinion of my night was changing.

I spoke first, "oh yes, we're fine, but we lost our room key, can you please give us another one, he's so clumsy sometimes" I knew this was my chance to get to the bottom of this, and frankly we were in a hotel known for VIP guests and great security, so there was no way we were going to be attacked. I felt safe, but asked if the attendant would come with us up to the room.

"Of course sir, not a problem, would you be able to provide some photo ID just to verify your identify. I do recognize you, however I just have to ask, it's hotel policy."

"Of course," I said, and turned to Christopher. He was just staring straight ahead, still not understanding fully what was going on. I grabbed his hand, it was cold and clammy, "Honey, I need your drivers license."

"Oh sure, yeah, um, ok here you go." He awkwardly fished his wallet out of his back pocket and took out his license.

After a couple of minutes a new key was generated and the lady handed Christopher his licence. He still hadn't said a word, and just kept his grip on the handle of his suitcase. I know he was trying to not panic, and just go with it, but the full impact of my panic had been dumped on his jet-lagged mind, and I could see he wasn't handling it well.

The three of us got into the elevator and the check-in clerk hit the 9th floor button. Everything seemed normal, and the beauty and cleanliness of the hotel made nothing seem out of place. Christopher just kept staring at me. His eyes betrayed his worry, but I made the "just go with it" face. We left the elevator and approached a room in the middle of the hallway. The clerk put the key card in, and the light on the lock turned a florescent green. She opened the door and almost fell backward.

The smell was unbearable. It stank, it reeked, it pulsated with the stench of rotten meat. Both Christopher and I made retching noises and backed into the hallway.

"Oh my god what is that?!" The clerk looked at Christopher with a sense of horror, looking like she wanted to hit him for what she presumed he had done in, or to the room. With hand over her mouth she yelled in a muffled tone, "Sir what IS that smell?!"

I knew the smell, I knew it all too well. I just stood there, taking it all in, feeling the full burning feeling at the back of my throat.

"I have no idea, that's definitely not from me!" Christopher shot back at her. He was a good 10 feet behind me at this point, the smell being too unbearable for him.

The clerk entered the room, and looked around. I followed right behind her. It was spotless. The bed hadn't been touched, the towels were still folded neatly, and the minibar hadn't been disturbed. The smell began to waft into the hall and the attendant ushered me out, left the room, and closed the door. Chris and the attendant just stood there gasping, trying to regain their breath, and I remained stock still. Remembering the night before.

We made our way back to the lobby, the hotel clerk looking pissed as hell, Chris standing there in a mixture of nausea and shock, and myself just terrified that I would run into whoever the other

"Christopher" was. I knew I was right, and from the look on his face Christopher believed me.

The elevator opened, and I looked at the attendant.

"We're sorry for the smell Sir, I realize that there's nothing you could have done to cause it, it's probably the toilet backed up or something. We'll find you another room, the hotel isn't too busy tonight. "

"Ok," I replied, "thank you, we'll go for a walk, we just need to clear our minds." I held Christopher's hand for dear life, and guided him to the lobby seating area.

"I'm so sorry Babe, I love you so much, I'm so sorry I didn't believe you." He was just so apologetic. "I need a drink," he continued, "but fucking hell, I need to change my clothes, that smell, that smell is just burned into them."

I sat in the lobby while Christopher made his way to the men's room, suitcase in tow. I had line of sight of the room, and felt safe surrounded by the Hotel staff and various other attendants.

Less than 2 minutes passed and Christopher came running out of the bathroom, white as a sheet. "We need to go, and we need to go NOW"

He dragged me by the hand into the street. "Babe, calm down, whats wrong?!" I asked as he dragged me towards our car.

"There was two of EVERYTHING. Two toothbrushes, two shirts, two sets of pants, two of every one of my, TWO OF EVERYTHING" He continued to drag me towards the car. I just went with it. It had been one hell of a night, and I wasn't going to object to anything.

We sat in the car, Christopher panting. "What do you mean there was two of everything?" I asked.

"I opened my suitcase and all of my clothes, my shoes, my everything, there was two sets of them." It was only then that I realized what he was talking about, and that he had left his suitcase in the men's room.

"Someone's been in the suitcase, and, and, well, replicated every fucking thing I own. I don't know what's going on, but this shit isn't right. We're going to Anthony's"

He hit the gas, hard. I felt myself pressed into the seat of the car as it accelerated out of the parking lot and merged onto the highway. Anthony lived about 20 minutes away, regular driving. We were going to make it in 10. Anthony was a physician, a neurologist, and really, knowing that we were not going home, and would have medical care, if needed, just made me feel better.

Christopher looked like he was going to cry, mixed with the anger of a man who had been wronged. His privacy had been invaded, someone was pretending to be him, and he had no idea what was going on. I put my hand on his thigh and squeezed, trying to reassure him. In the 8 years that I had known him, I had never seen him like this.

I called Anthony.

Me: Anthony, it's Peter, we're coming over, Christopher and I need to spend the night, I'll explain when I get there.

Anthony: Oh...Um. Ok. Are you alright? Do either of you need anything?

Me: No, just make sure that there's parking in the driveway.

Anthony: Sure thing, see you soon. Tell Chris thanks again for the gift.

I assumed Christopher had sent Anthony a gift from Vienna, he usually sent things back for him whenever he travelled. He's been the big brother that Anthony needed many times throughout his life.

We pulled into the drive. Christopher bolted out of the car and banged on Anthony's door. Anthony opened the door, and Christopher burst in. "Get in Peter and lock the door. Anthony, put on the Alarm system."

Anthony complied and asked what the hell was going on. Christopher started,

Chris: We've had a fucking crazy night Tony, we need to stay here, something really strange is going on, I don't feel safe.

Anthony: Why?! What could have happened in the past hour to make you this way?

Chris: The pasthour?

Anthony: Yeah, you looked a little out of it when you dropped the bag off, but I figured it was the jet lag. At least the lip looks a little less swollen, good to see the bendryl I gave you is working. And damn, glad to see you showered, you stank! Mind you no one smells good after a day of travel!

Christopher nearly fainted. He just fell back into the chair that was behind him.

Me: Anthony, did you let Christopher in, when he came here an hour ago?

Anthony: Of course, he gave me the gift bag, and I told him to come in so I could take a look at his lip. He said he was just having a reaction to some pineapple in the salad from the plane (a pineapple allergy runs in Christopher's family, and Anthony is aware of this), so I just gave him some benadryl and told him to drink lots of water.

Me: Did he look different otherwise? Was he fatter?

Anthony: What? What do you mean? Did he look any fatter than he is now? No.

Me: What was he driving?

Anthony: Your BMW. your car.

Me: You mean that car, that we have parked in your drive way right now?

Anthony: Yes, he said he was going to get you and then go to dinner at the King Edward. Christopher Jospeh Tillman, what the hell is going on?! You two are freaking me out.

Me: Anthony, I picked up Christopher from the Airport, I've been with him, and with our car all afternoon. That thing that came to the house wasn't Christopher.

Anthony looked at us skeptically, but his medical mind made him realize that there was no way Christopher's lip would look so normal within an hour. I started telling him the story, all the while keeping an eye on Christopher, who had gone from pale white to a strange greenish hue. I could only imagine what was going through his mind.

Just then my phone rang. It was Vass (short for Vasilli), the Chemist that did my palm scraping from earlier on in the day.

Me: Hey Vass, what's up? (its about 8:30pm at this point).

Vass: Are you on campus tomorrow? I need to see you. We have some results back and they're unusual. Nothing that could hurt you, so don't panic about that, but just not....normal.

Me: Vass, tell me what's going on. What did you find? I can't handle anymore suspense after today.

Vass was a very gruff, very bearish Russian man, whom I had known for quite a few years. I had never heard him sound confused or worried. Tonight, his voice shook with both of those emotions. It almost sounded like he was under duress.

Vass: Peter, you're my friend, I don't want to jump to conclusions, but the residue from under your fingernails was human tissue. It was necrotizing, rotting, human tissue. What's your blood type?

Me: O-negative

Vass: this is AB-positive. I think you need to answer some questions for me Peter.

Me: I, um I'm, what? Ok, I'll come into the lab in the morning. Thanks Vass

Vass: No problem, it's a good thing you don't have that suitcase anymore. Goodnight.

As I hung up the phone, I realized I never told Vass that I no longer had the suitcase.

I turned to Christopher, he had the gift bag that "he" had given to Anthony an hour earlier in his hand. It was filled with cheesy Austrian souvenirs, and nothing really of note.

Except for a card in an envelope. Chris opened the envelope and scanned the card

"What the fuck!" Chris yelled, and handed me the card.

It wasn't hand written, it was typed

6:08 - Aroive at Aeropurt

6:44 - Dey git Home

7:33 - HuTel.

7:41 - Gho TO rooUm.

7:58 - LEave Kwik. Gho TO car

8:15 - Nthony

8:33 - Fone rIng - Kemist

11:45 - ME

It’s 10:45 as I type this on my iPad. Anthony, myself and Chris are sitting in a Tim Hortons (Coffee Shop) across the road from 52 Division (a police precinct). Waiting.

Part 3

10:45pm - Tuesday July 28, 2014

Christopher, Anthony and myself were all crammed into a booth inside the coffee shop. Confusion, anger, fear, hatred, every single visceral emotion that pulsates in a situation of unknowing flew between the three of us. Virtually no words were exchanged. I think we all sat there, contemplating our own mortality. If this thing, if this "person" knew our every move and exactly where we were going to be, how could we do anything about it? What force did we have to fight it/he?

I held tightly onto Christopher's hand. His normally warm loving hands were cold and clammy with fear. We were across the road from the Police station, but how would we explain ourselves? We had brought the note, but what would the introduction be?

"Oh Hello officer, my husband and all of his posessions, including a full sized sedan were replicated and used to terrify his cousin, a high ranking neurologist specializing in pediatrics at Sick Kids Hospital." I couldn't imagine the reaction, I could only imagine that we were going to either be laughed at, or jeoardize Anthony's career if we said anything. "The brain doctor is seeing shit, and thinks that his cousin is a dopelganger...that I may or may not have slept next to...while my REAL husband was in Vienna. No, seriously, believe us. Oh I teach Physics too!"

Fuck, this truly was a Catch-22, no way to help ourselves, I couldn't even begin to think of how we would start.

Anthony isn't one for silences, he's a very talkative man and I could feel the tension was getting to him. Saw open a cranium, play around in there and stitch it back up? Sure, no problem. Waiting for a seemingly paranormal creature in a coffee shop in the middle of the largest Canadian metropolis, hell no.

"I'm going to order, do you guys want anything?" Anthony asked as he rose from the table.

"Sit the hell down, you aren't going anywhere." Christopher was starting to get angry, he was a lawyer and his legally trained bulldog mind was beginning to get the better of him. I could see that he was beginning to reach his limit with what was going on.

"Chris, you can see me, the counter is what? 2 feet away? We can't just sit here, we have to order, plus I'm parched, it's about 30degrees (85F) out there. You two just keep looking at me, and I'll keep looking at you? Cool?"

"I'll take an IceCap (iced cappuccino for the non-Canadians)," Chris acquiesed.

"I'll just have a coffee," I weakly said. I realized that neither Chris nor I had eaten since this started and we had to force ourselves to eat something. "And a bagel, toasted with butter."

Anthony made his way to the counter, about four steps away, and just to keep everyone's mind at peace and focus on the task at hand, we continued the conversation.

Christopher: So we all agree that he knows we're here, right?

Peter: Absolutely, he knew we were here, before we knew we were coming here.

Anthony: We're in public, the cops are across the road, this is the best place to be. If he's going to try anything all these people would notice and say something. The place is well lit, and once again, Cops, across the road.

He was right. There was little chance one of us would be stabbed or murdered in the middle of a restaurant, but all of us were convinced that "Chris" would show up, espeically after the experience at the Kind Edward Hotel; he came there, he waited, and then he left. He was "going to get his husband (me)," according to the check-in clerk.

Chris looked around Anthony, vigilant as ever. My man. "You know, he's right. This place is pretty busy, especially for a wednesday night."

I took my eyes off Anthony as well, looked behind us, even though the door was in the opposite direction and I swore I wouldn't take my eyes off of it. They were both right, there were a lot of kids, and what looked like an inconsiderate/neglectful woman tending to them all. About four kids, one parent. Typical for that part of downtown. It was a rich city, but like everywhere, there was poverty.

Anthony approached the counter and placed the order. The attendant, unusually happy for 11:00pm (Fuck, 45 minutes), filled the order and as she passed the tray to Anthony looked at him and said, "Don't forget to Roll up the Rim to win!" "Thanks," said Anthony and made the four steps back to our booth.

Sidebar: For those of you who aren't Canadian, "Roll up the Rim to Win," is pretty much a national event. The loyalty american's pay to Starbucks is reciprocated in Canada with our loyalty to Tim Hortons. It's a national institution. Twice a year they hold a contest where you literally roll up the rim of your coffee cup and see if you've won a prize. Quite like checking under a pop bottle cap to see if you've won a prize. This is what the rolled rim looks like

We sat there and drank our drinks in virtual silence. Just watching the clock. About 10 minutes passed (11:11pm), and I couldn't handle the noise of the damn kids anymore. I looked at Anthony and Chris, "I need a cigarette, can we all go outside? We'll stay by the door, and if anything, it's a straight shot across the parking lot to the cop station, we can make it." They looked at each other, and agreed, the noise from the kids was getting too much, and they could just use the brake instead of sitting there, waiting for our visitor to arrive.

We all stood up, almost in a choreographed manner, no one wanting to be left behind in the cafe. And made our way to the door. We stood right by the entrance, with our car parked in front of us. It had cooled down a fair amount and there was definitely a bit of a nip in the air. Hell this is Canada, nothing surprising there.

"Christopher, open the car, I'm going to grab my sweater from the back seat." He hit the auto opener on his keys and the locks flew open. I approached the vehicle, clearly looking inside to see if anyone was crouched in the backseat, just waiting for me. Nothing. I opened the door, constantly looking back at Anthony and Christopher who were less than a foot away from me at this point, grabbed the sweater and we all walked back to the entrance. I had finished the cigarette in record time and just wanted to get back in the restaurant. Even though we could run to the police station if need be, the silence of the parking lot, coupled with the exposure of being outside just gave me an eerie feeling. Anthony and Christopher agreed with me and we all went back inside.

11:30pm

Damn, the kids were annoying. Christopher and I were just in the initial phases of adoption, and loved children dearly, but these kids wouldn't shut up. Coupled with the tension of what we were waiting for, it started to get too much. Christopher squeezed my hand, "I'm just gonna tell them to shut up, fuck

I can't handle this."

"Calm down, focus on the task at hand, let that be white noise." Anthony, our ever patient physician, had a very calming effect on Christopher and this seemed to work.

Every second that passed, every minute that dragged by, we could feel the tension building. Would he come through the door? Would he manifest right in front of us? How would he do it? And the ultimate question? What the hell did "Chris" want with us? what was he trying to extract from us that we could possibly give him?

Was it money? Say so, and I'll write the cheque for you right there. Was it control? Was it power? Was it sexual favours? If it was that, I'd volunteer to do him right then and there if that meant we'd be left alone.

Not a one of us said a word for the next 15 minutes, we sat there in utter silence, the overpowering din of the coffee shop providing what turned out to be rather useful background noise. In hindsight, if the Tim Horton's had been dead silent, we would have had a much harder time being there.

11:45.

We all looked at one another. Nothing. Nothing changed, nothing happened, the din and the noise still continued, people kept placing orders, the overly happy employee kept filling the orders, and just nothing. Christopher kept playing with the car keys, but still, nothing. Anthony finished his coffee and rolled the rim. He froze.

Where it should have said, "Reyassez S'il Vous plait//Please try again" or "You won a donut!" it just said

oNE uAnd oNe is ToO. wWwhY 3?

Anthony just said, "Oh shit," and showed us the rim. The creature knew we were here, he knew how to communicate with us. But he wasn't here. What the hell was he trying to say.

Christopher, Anthony and I looked at one another. Maybe he wasn't going to show up in such a crowded place, and chose to send us a message this way. Maybe we had outsmarted him by picking such a public place, we had screwed up his timeline. Here we were waiti

"Hey Mister, what happened to your lip?"

Those 7 words were like a gong, like the so-called shot heard around the world, fuck they were a canon in the noisy room to us. Chris and I turned around and Anthony, already facing that direction, looked over our shoulders. There was a man sitting in the booth behind ours, his back to us. He was wearing a hat and a jacket with the collar popped. There, standing, looking at him was a girl, no more than six years old staring at his face.

"Mister, why's your lip so fat? Thats grossssss!"

I have never moved that fast in my life.

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST RUN!" Was the only thing that Anthony could think to say. Christopher and I shot out of the coffee shop as quickly as we could. Christopher hit the clicker for the car door and the safety of the "beep beep!" that automatic locks make when they open sounded; we all piled into the car. Christopher in the drivers seat, me in the passenger and Anthony in the back.

We hit the start button and the engine came alive with a soft purr. Christopher threw the car into reverse and we gunned it out of the parking lot and straight in the parking lot of the cop station.

All three of us were yelling, nothing was discernable. Christopher was yelling about how the hell did we miss him coming into the Cafe, that seat was definintely empty when we sat down. Anthony was almost on the verge of hyperventilating and kept asking what the fuck we think he wanted. And I just sat there, practially screaming gibberish.

We had come to an abrupt stop in front of the door of the police station. Frozen inside the car. Yes, we know, we should have run inside, but none of us could move. It still boggles my mind that Christopher was able to get the damn car across the road without hitting anyone. Dundas Street is incredibly busy. But still, none of us could move, we just sat there.

Anthony broke the silence.

Anthony: Stay in the car, don't go inside. We never saw his face, we don't know what we're going in there to report. We can't just walk in and say 'A man with a fat lip caused a small girl to be grossed out so we ran out of there' What the fuck do you think the cops are going to think? They're going to think we're fucking drugged out of our minds.

Me: Are you fucking kidding me?! The hell with this shit, I'm going inside. I'm done. I can't

Christopher: Stop! He's right, we don't know if that was him. Maybe it was some druggie with fucked up meth teeth, we don't know anything yet. Sure it happened at 11:45, but what the fuck does that mean.

Anthony: We gotta think this through. Turn off the lights and wait to see if he leaves.

We all sat there, realizing that regardless of how scared we were, regardless of what had happened, we had nothing to tell the cops. We had nothing, we couldn't tell them about "Chris" coming home, because that story would break down due to total lack of evidence. No texts were on my phone, nothing. We couldn't tell them about "Chris" dropping the bag off at Anthony's because the second they asked what he looked like and what he drove, Dr. Anthony Jovid would have to say, "Oh, he looked like the guy standing next to me, and he drove the car I came here in."

We had nothing.

We sat there, in the car, with nothing left to do but wait.

11:47PM.

We sat there, all of us in shock and pure fear. The cops were less than a stone's throw away from us, and we knew if we saw anything we'd book it from the car and just go grab a police officer, until then....we had nothing to go on. We just stared at the only entrance to the Tim Hortons we could see, the one we had gone in and out of several times. The one that led to the parking lot where I had that cigarette.

"I'm burning up, I need to cool down, this is getting to me." Christopher said. I could only imagine how frayed my poor husband's nerves were at this point, so I reached over and put on the AC. There was no fucking way I would be doing down a window. We had never seen that thing arrive or leave the coffee shop, who knew what he was capable of.

The AC turned on, and once again the hum of the fan filled the car with a much needed noise. And all we did was stare. Stare at that damn door.

"If you're putting on the AC, I'm gonna put on this sweater, Peter is this yours?" Anthony asked from the back seat.

“Yeah, go head its. Wait! Anthony, what colour is the fucking sweater?!”

Anthony: IT’S BLUE WITH A HOOD.

ME: Get the fuck out of the car now! GO GO GO!!!

I had taken my blue sweater out of MY car when I went for a cigarette while we were still waiting. I was wearing my blue sweater. That was the creature's replication of my blue sweater. We were inside the fucking creature's car. We couldn’t tell the difference because there was no difference. This was the car that had driven to Anthony’s house when "Chris" delivered the gift bag.

The three of us frantically tried to open the doors but they wouldn’t budge. It was like they were welded shut. Christopher reached into the middle console and pulled out the emergency “If you’re in a fire in your car use this to break the windshield” hammer I made him buy and pounded away at the glass. Nothing, not even a scratch. We were trapped INSIDE the creatures car.

“PRESS THE FUCKING HORN” screamed Anthony from the back. We were in the police parking lot, they were sure to hear us. But nothing, we tried and tried. We tried screaming, kept trying the doors. Anthony was lying on the backseat trying to kick the door open as hard as he could, but the glass refused to give.

Then suddenly, the smell. That rank, odorous smell. Rotten meat, fetid flesh, acrid, pungent, all consuming came pumping out of the AC vents. I tried to turn off the AC but the car continued to fill with the smell. There was nothing we could do. I could hear Anthony retching in the back seat. This was his first exposure to it and he couldn’t handle it. Christopher had covered his nose and mouth with his hand but was trying very hard to hold back vomit.

All three of us kept trying the doors but they were not Moving.

“Oh Fucking hell, look!” screamed Christopher, his voice muffled by his own hand.

Across the road, standing, holding his suitcase, with his hat and coat on, stood “Chris.” He was pointing to us. I could almost feel that pointed finger rubbing across my face, I had never been more scared in my entire life. The smell was overpowering, the sight was overpowering, I was praying to faint, just so I wouldn’t have to deal with this situation, but my body wouldn’t let me.

Then the creature slowly, methodically moved his hand and pointed to another car. To our car, parked in Tim Hortons parking lot. Exactly where this one had been. In the exact spot. Impossible. Utterly impossible. What could this creature do. What was he capable of.

The smell made screaming impossible, so in order to breathe as much as possible, we all just stopped yelling and just looked at the creature “Chris.”

He began crossing the road. In smooth, very human, unassuming steps he made his way across the road. He was standing in the parking lot, holding his suitcase and slowly advancing towards us. By now we could all see his trade mark feature.

It was my husband. It was my Christopher. It was the love of my life, but with the most grotesque oversized, swollen upper lip. It looked infected and engorged. I put both my hands on my Christopher, shielding him from the creature that was approaching from the passenger side of the vehicle. He came extremely close.

We were frozen in terror. No one dared moved, Anthony was pressing up against the door opposite to the creature, filled with a fear reserved for children and those in war zones.

And then the creature made it's way to Anthony's passenger side window. Not so close as to touch the window, but close enough for Anthony to know he was the one that the creature wanted. He couldn't scream. He was paralyzed with fear, as we all were. The creature raised his hand. His perfeclty human shaped. Perfeclty Christopher shaped hand and pointed at Anthony. And then made the "no no no" gesture, waiving one finger from side to side.

He was signaling what the Rim of the coffee cup had told us. Anthony shouldn't have been there. 1+1 is 2. He wanted Christopher and I, and wanted Nothing to do with Anthony. He looked me dead in my eyes, upper lip pulsating, and then looked at Christopher. He averted his gaze quickly, as if he couldn't standing seeing what my Christopher, what the REAL Christopher looked like.

And then, he was gone. He turned around, suitcase still firmly in hand, and walked away. He walked to the left of us, that's all we saw. We never saw where he went. He just vanished into the night. By the time the creature was out of sight the awful smell died down.

The locks of the car flew open, and the three of us threw ourselves out of the vehicle. Anthony couldn't stand, the overwhelming stench was too much for him, but I propped him up and Christopher held the door to the police station. We were inside in a flash, Anthony's dead-weight and all.

A police officer rushed towards us.

"What's going on? Is he ok?" Asked the police officer. He reached to his shoulder mounted radio and spoke into it. "DI 52, DI 52, three males, one injury. Med staff to the Lobby"

Anthony sprang up. The cool, clean air of the inside of the police station drove the life back into him like a hammer to a nail.

"We're being stalked, we're being followed, we're being, we're being, fuck." Anthony had reached his point, he had been singled out by the creature, he had been pointed at and it was all too much for him to bare. He just started weeping uncontrollably. Not knowing how to handle any of this.

"Officer, we need to file a police report immediately." Chris, ever the present lawyer, took control of the situation.

"Ok, I'm Officer Michael Han, I'll take the report, but your friend needs help." Right as he finished a male officer wearing gloves and carrying a medical supply kit came around the corner and approached us. He could see Anthony in distress and immediately started to attend to him.

Officer Han: Ok Gentlemen, care to tell me what's going on?

Me: I'm Dr. Peter Tillman, and this is my husband Christopher Tillman, we're being stalked and threatened and we need to be protected.

Christopher: The person stalking us has assumed my identity and has been charging things to my credit card, attempted to use (steal wasn't an appropriate word and Christopher knew it) my vehicle, and even entered my home while my husband was there by himself.

Office Han: Ok, I understand the panic. But who's your friend and what does he have to do with this?

Christopher: His name is Dr. Anthony Jovid, and he's my cousin. He's been helping us out since we realized that we weren't safe.

Officer Han: and how long has that been?

Christopher and I blankly stared at one another, not knowing how to answer this man's question. We couldn't tell him everything because he would think we were crazy, but at the same point, we had to

disclose what happened.

Christopher: Since yesterday, around 8pm. That's when he entered my home, impersonated me, and attempted to harrass my husband.

Officer Han: ok, do you know where this person is now?

Anthony pulled off the oxygen mask that they had placed over his mouth. The on site nurse had proped him up in a chair so that he could be safe if he fainted. "Show him the car!" He screamed. Well it wasn't a scream since he had no energy with which to do so.

Christopher and I took Officer Han outside the door, waiting to show him the duplicate car that the creature had conned us into getting into. But nothing. The car was gone. I looked across the road and just as expected, I could see my car, my real car, or I thought it was my real car, sitting in the parking lot of the Tim Hortons.

Not wanting to risk it, I told the officer to come with us across the road. He radioed in to tell the control board where he was going, and crossed the road with us. Anthony remained in the police station, after all, the creature apparently didn't want him.

Officer Han, Christopher and myself approached the vehicle. Not knowing what to expect. The cop took out his flash light and shon it inside the car.

Officer Han: This your vehicle Sir?

Christopher: Yes, it's registered in both our names

Officer Han: Please open the doors. If you do not mind

Christopher: Not at All, please have a look around.

The police officer thoroughly searched the vehicle, even lifting the bottom part of the trunk and rifiling through the glove compartment. We waived any right we had to unnecessary search and seizure and let the man do his job.

Of course there was nothing. Nothing at all.

Officer Han: Come back with me to the station, and fill out the paper work. We'll see how your friend's doing. If he needs to go to the hospital, I'll ride him over. If not, there's not really much we can do gentleman.

Christopher: But, you, I, well, how!

Peter: Nothing officer?

Christopher: He's right, there's not much he can do. Thank you Sir, we'll fill out the paper work.

We all got into the car, including Officer Han who we asked to accompany us, and went back to the station in order to fill out the paper work. It took less than 20 minutes, and Anthony had recovered well enough to come with us. We thanked the police and went into the parking lot.

I unlocked the car and looked around to make sure nothing was off. But what the hell could I prove? What did I know any more? nothing. We couldn't tell what was real from what was fake anymore.

We sat in the car, engine running for about 15 minutes and discussed what we should do. The suggestions ranged from a hotel, to Anthony's, to our house to just staying in the parking lot. Regardless of where we went, this creature would find us. At least we had filled out the police report and Officer Han took us serious enough to say he would come by tomorrow and check on us. It was

about 1am by the time all of this was finished.

Anthony and I decided to go to my mum's place in Yorkville. It was a penthouse with more than enough room to house us, and frankly it seemed that this thing, this creature, this fake Chris was only after myself and Christopher. So we knew we would be safe there. And it was only a few minutes away.

I called my mum, and she said to come on over. She's a bit of a night owl and I didn't give her any details about why we were in the area or why we wanted to come over. She just said to stop on by. So we went.

On the drive, I asked Christopher for the paperwork that the cop had given us, just so I could make sure it was safe. There was now an official record of what had happened to us, and I wanted to make sure my copy was reachable. Just in case.

I took one glance down at the paper. I wasn't shocked, I wasn't surprised, I wasn't offput. I was just plain terrified. Instead of a detail of the incident in the section meant for that. It only said the same three words over and over and over.

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I'm at my mum's house now. I sit and wait for tomorrow. This is starting to make more sense now. I guess all debts do need to be paid.

Part 4

NOTE1: All of this happened between when we got to my mum's place and right before I uploaded the last update. It was a lot, and I really didn't want to create a post that was too long.

NOTE2: I had a long conversation with my mother. Her recollections are in italics.

Thank you all so much for your support and your kindness during this intensely terrifying time in my life.

Anthony, Christopher and I pulled up to the entrance of my Mother's condominium. It had a beautiful circular driveway, a gate that allowed people and vehicles in and out, and an extremely ornate fountain in the centre of the courtyard. 24 hour valet parking was a nice perk.

Anthony: Are you sure that you want to let some poor unsuspecting Valet drive this car. What if that thing decides he wants to take it for another spin?

Me: Honestly at this point, I doubt that it's after anyone but me and Chris. I mean you were singled out, he pointed right at you.

Anthony: Thanks Pete, I really needed to be reminded of that.

Anthony was still obviously shaken, but also extremely relieved that he was not being hunted. Or Haunted. Whatever the right word may have been.

The valet approached the car; a young woman, about 25 years old in a sharp brass button jacket and matching pants. "Hello Mr. Tillman I hope this night finds you doing well," she said looking at Christopher. I presume you're here to see Mrs. Blochbauer?" I recognized the valet, Elise I think her name is, always very sweet.

"I am, but I don't think we'll be needing you to park the vehicle, we'll drive ourselves." Christopher had made the decision to spare this poor woman from whatever horrors she could potentially be subjected to by driving the car.

What has my life become? Letting a Valet park a car was now a hazard to be avoided because a face-stealing creature might stink her to death? God, I just wanted relief.

We turned the car into the underground parking lot. My mother's condo was the largest ones in the building, and as such it entitled her to six reserved parking spaces. As we descended a serious feeling of unease enveloped all of us. We were going underground? After a night like this?

The smiling faces of the three security guards we saw walking around reassured us, but god knows why. This thing was capable of manifesting unnoticed in a busy restaurant and replicating a full sized car; three security guards would be useless. Hell, the entire Air Force would probably be of no use to us at this point.

We parked, and sat in the car, all of us were a combination of exhaustion and terror, not really knowing what we were supposed to do with ourselves.

Anthony, as always broke the silence that we had opted for. "Do you really want to involve your mother in this?"

Christopher sternly shot back at him "Anthony, you heard what Peter said. It doesn't want anything to do with you. One plus one is two, you're safe, and I'm sure his mum is too."

I agreed with Christopher, and pointed out that we should at least leave the basement. We exited the

vehicle and hurried to the elevator. Another closed space. Crap.

Christopher pushed the button, and due to the good services of the Valet, the Elevator arrived very quickly, with her inside of it. Good evening Dr. Tillman, how are you tonight?" She asked in a very comforting tone.

"You wouldn't believe if I told you," was the only thing that came out of my mouth. I don't know why. It just made the elevator ride to the penthouse very awkward.

"Well, I hope your tomorrow is much better than your tonight has been." She was such a sweet girl, and that's really what we all needed in that moment. Unadulterated comfort, since whatever semblance of peace we had in our lives had been completely stripped away.

We rode the rest of the way in complete silence.

The elevator doors opened into the hallway, and Christopher and Anthony left very quickly. Tensions were still running high.

"Take care Dr Tillman," the valet said from inside the elevator. I turned and smiled.

"And Don't worry Sir, I'm sure you'll find your suitcase, it'll be in the garage when you get home." She smiled. The door closed.

My blood ran cold, Christopher and Anthony were too far ahead of me to notice what she had said. The creature knew we were here. There really was no outrunning this thing. I either had to live with it, or kill myself. I was just left standing in the hallway.

Christopher turned and looked at me, "Babe, are you ok? Come on, let's just get inside." I shook myself back to reality, whatever that was, and booked it to the apartment door. There were two penthouse suites on the floor, one on either side of the hall. We rang the doorbell and the comforting Westminster chime sounded.

One of the night maids opened the door. "Good evening Dr. Tillman, your mother is reading on the terrace, I'll let her know you're here."

I wasn't 12 anymore. I knew 'reading on the terrace' was code for smoking a joint. It was quite chilly, there was no way she was reading outside.

We all made our way to the living room and collapsed into individual chairs.

It had been 24 hours since this all started. Well a bit over that, but it was only the night before that the creature had slept next to me, it had only been about 8 hours since we were at Anthony's and had only been 2 hours since my irrationality was confirmed by our encounter with "Chris" in the parking lot.

Being in my mum's condo made me feel safe. Thank god she still had that affect on me.

My mother had smoked pot since the 70s, but it wasn't until I had my own issues with drugs that she divulge that fact to me. Something about making me feel more connected to her and making it easier for her to put me into rehab. Pot, meth, yeah really not the same thing, but whatever made the poor woman feel more connected to me. I hate that version of myself. I don't think of that Peter. That Peter died in rehab.

"Darlings! How are you! Anthony, it's been far too long. Chris how was Vienna?" My mother turned the corner into the living room. Diane Von Furstenberg wrap dress (vintage, of course) flowing in the breeze coming from the open terrace door. She was finishing up the chocolate chip cookie that was her favourite munchie. She wasn't one for coming second in a conversation and dominated any room

she was in. Think Dame Edna meets Barbara Walters.

"I'm ok Mum, just exhausted, we've had a pretty intense afternoon." I decided to not sugar coat anything and just be straightforward with her.

"Peter, what's wrong?" My mother's tone had changed. She was now obviously concerned, and wanted every detail of why we were there and where we had come from. She walked over and sat next to Christopher, facing me.

“Mum, something’s following us. I don’t know what, I don’t know how long it’s been around, but yesterday....yesterday it...” This was the third time in less than 24 hours that I found myself telling the story about the creature sleeping next to me, and for some reason it hurt more, it terrified me more, to tell it to my mother. I knew how much she cared about me, and how it had only been “her and I” since Dad passed away, so I knew telling her this would cause her so much pain.

“Yesterday it shared a bed with me.” I just blurted it out. Tonight wasn’t the night for filters.

My mother is a pale woman, but whatever colour she had in her face drained instantly. There was no hiding her emotions, she was terrified. Something had tried to hurt her little boy, and she believed me. Then again, I was always open, even with the drug usage, so she had no reason to believe I was lying.

“What do you mean it shared a bed with you? Did you have sex with it? And what the hell is it? What sort of creature are you referring to?” I think it was the tone, or the straightforward abruptness of her questions that set me on edge. This was the first time I was telling the story and it was being believed, but her reactions seemed so controlled. Her question so clean and methodical.

“No! I did not have sex with it, mother!” I raised my voice in a vainglorious attempt at self-defence, only to realize that I shouldn’t be yelling at my mother. “It’s, well it’s Christopher. Well it’s not really Christopher, obviously, but it looks exactly like him, only it’s thicker, or it was thicker, and it has this god awful lip that looks like its about to explode.”

My mother shot out of her seat and stood stock still; arms akimbo, “Peter Jurge Tillman! You’ve been doing drugs again haven’t you! What is it this time?! Cocaine! LSD! Methamphetamine! Heroine again?!” She rarely yelled at me, but this was almost at the top of her voice. The maid who was within sight made herself scarce.

“Mother! I have not!” I was standing now, my large frame dominating my mother. Two bulls rearing to attack one another.

“Paola he’s telling the truth. I wouldn’t have believed him either, but I saw it with my own eyes.” Christopher, my staunch defender, said as he slowly stood up and put his hand on my mother’s shoulder. “Peter, I’ll tell her the rest.”

“No, I don’t want to hear the rest, that’s enough for one night. You boys need to get some rest and in the morning we’ll discuss this. I’m exhausted and frankly my mind’s not clear enough to talk about monsters and boogeymen right now!” She was defiant and unyielding. I knew from how she was acting that she was in no mood to hear our story, but this was very odd. My mother was never one to doubt me, and was never one to fly into a rage when confronted with a good piece of gossip or news.

“For fuck’s sake mother, we’re being stalked and could be in danger!” I couldn’t hold it in. I rarely swore around her; I’m a grown man and I still don’t curse in front of my mother, but this time it was warranted.

“You’re in one of the safest buildings in the city, nothing can get you here. Boys, please change and make yourselves comfortable. Anthony, I’m sorry but I don’t have anything in your size, but we’ll get you some toiletries and a robe. You can have a nice warm shower. Christopher, Peter, help yourselves.”

She wandered out of the room and directed Anthony to Sylvie, one of the night staff who was too busy pretending that she did not hear my mother reference my drug-addled past, to realize that my mother had walked up behind her.

“Sylvie, this is Anthony, please show him to a room and make him comfortable.” My mother, ever the hostess.

Christopher had left the room to go and change. He had showered when we had returned home from the airport, but that was hours ago, and after all the sweating and insanity that we had gone through, he figured that a nice long shower would do him some good. I refused to let him go and told him to shower with the door open. I refused to let him be out of sight for any reason.

I found myself standing alone in the cavernous living room staring out the wall of windows. The city was beautiful at night, but the only thing on my mind was when the creature would strike next. He had already sent me a message via the Valet. He knew I was here. What would happen. What the hell did he want, and why me?

“Come with me onto the terrace,” my mother said as she walked up behind me. “Jesus! Don’t scare me like that, not after what I’ve gone through!” I sternly said to her. “It’s bad enough that you think I’m crazy.”

“Put your jacket on and come with me onto the terrace. Bring your cigarettes.” She ordered.

My mum had smoked cigarettes until she was pregnant with me, or so she claimed, and hated the fact that I smoked tobacco. “Marijuana’s a beautiful, healthy plant, no carcinogens” was always her retort whenever I threw the fact that she smoked pot in her face.

My mother didn’t wait for me and was already out on the terrace, second (or potentially third) joint lit. She inhaled deeply, “Sit down.” She gestured to the lounger that was three feet away from me.

“I don’t feel like sitting, I’d rather stand,” I lit my cigarette.

My mother had her back to me and was looking out over the city. I had never really seen her like this, not since dad died. She was usually very upbeat and energetic; pot never had a downer effect on my mother, but rather made her mind flow more easily and helped her to have that zest she was known for.

“Which one happens first, the smell, or the sight.” My mother quietly asked, still facing the city.

I coughed. I had smoked for 15 years, I knew how to smoke, but that question caught me off guard completely. I coughed hard, trying to catch my breath.

“WHAT?! WHAT DID YOU SAY?!” I wheezed at her. I was trying to scream, but like Anthony in the police station, the first question just knocked the wind out of me.

Mum: What happens first, do you see him, or do you smell him.

Me: How do you know about the smell?! Has he been here?! Did he hurt you?

Mum: Answer the question Peter, Do you smell him first or do you see him first?

Me: It's always the smell. I'm not telling you anything else until you tell me what you know.

Mum: is it the lip or the eyes?

Me: What?

Mum: Is it his lip that bulges out or is it his eyes? Which one? I know you said something about his lip, but I want to make sure.

She hadn't turned to face me. At all. I could tell from the sound of her voice that her throat was starting to tighten, as if she was on the verge of tears. I hated seeing my mother cry, but I wanted some damn answers.

Me: It's his lip.

Mum: Did he give you anything? Has he left you any notes or cards?

I took the crumpled police report from my pocket and handed it to her, I pointed out the section where the incident report was supposed to have been:

niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow niEw BeginNing TOmOreRow

Mum: Ok, it's time to pay the debt. All debts must be paid. All dues have to be collected.

My mother turned around, tears were streaming down her face. I slowly walked up to her and she took another drag from the dying joint.

"Peter, we need to talk about your future, about what's going to happen." She tearfully said. I knew that this was my chance to finally get some answers, to finally understand what was happening in my life. But to know that my mother knew something about this and never said anything enraged me.

"How could you not tell me about this? How could you keep something like this a secret?" I asked, both hurt and angry. Actually I was livid, virtually vibrating out of sheer and total rage. Teeth clenched.

"We were told you had more time, they told us that they would only come after we had both died. After you had your son," She put her hand on my shoulder and out of rage I pushed her away.

"Who is they?! What is going on?!" I demanded answers. The rage had vanished and was instantly replaced with a fear of not knowing and a sadness that my mother knew without telling me anything.

"Son, our past is a lie. Your father was never very good at...was never very good at...well he really was never very good at anything. Your grandparents were amazing. Both his parents and my parents knew one another before the war, during the time in the camps. His parents were sent to Buchenwald, and my parents were dumped into Mauthausen. Luckily none of them, his parents nor mine, were sent to Auschwitz or Bergen Belsen, but Buchenwald was no luxury hotel."

"When they left the camps at the end of the war, they ran into one another as they made their ways across a war-ravaged Europe. Your father's mother and my father even started a business together. They were cloth merchants. Not rich by any standards, but it was the 40s. The name of the game wasn't get rich, it was survive. We were poor, our poverty stemmed back generations, but we always made ends meet."

“Eventually our parents, drifted and lost touch with one another. When your father was a teenager he came back to Germany to find work, and there he found me. We fell deeply in love within a matter of weeks, our parents not knowing, and frankly we had no clue that they knew one another. Our courtship become more intense and finally we realized that we had to tell our parents. He wrote back to his father and mother, and I brought him home to meet my parents.”

“Within the first five minutes of meeting my parents, and finding out who his parents were, my father had spat at him and told him to never enter our house again.”

This was a story that I had never heard and I was still not seeing how this had anything to do with me, or the creature.

“What the hell does this have to do with the damn creature?” I interrupted.

She paid me no mind and continued to talk.

“My father told me to never bring him back to that house, my mother barely said a word. I was shocked, I had no idea why they would behave like this. Later that night I went to my mother and asked what could have made papa react as strongly as he had. My poor mother broke down crying, and told me that while her husband and your father’s mother were busy trying to make ends meet, She and your father’s father were busy....well busy staying busy.”

I knew this meant that my paternal grandfather and my maternal grandmother had had an affair. I was slightly disappointed, but that entire generation was dead and none of this was explaining what the creature had to do with anything.

“Their spouses finally found out and were livid. My father threatened to leave my mother and never talk to her again, he called her a whore, and asked how, when he had gone hungry many nights in the camps saving scraps for her to eat, that she could throw herself at another man. My mother really had no defenses against this and become extremely depressed after her affair with your paternal grandfather ended.”

“Anyway, your father and I refused to be separated. We refused to let our parents hatred for one another get in the way of our love. We loved one another so much Peter, you have to believe me. We were so madly in love and refused to let one another go. We were both kicked out of our homes and told never to return. We were poor. We were beyond poor. Neither him nor I had any schooling, we had no funds to get by on, and it wasn’t like the olden days when we could farm. Europe was changing and we needed to make money.”

“Your father got a job at a bank that paid him a meager wage. He was a teller, but that was probably because the bank manager thought she would be able to convince your father to fuck her if she kept him employed.”

I had never heard my mother speak with so much vulgarity before. I kind of liked that she was letting it go, and at the same point was at my whits end. I didn’t need to hear about the family history, I just wanted to know what was happening.

“And then one day it changed. It all changed. Your father came home and told me that he had saved up all of his earnings and had dumped them into the markets. ‘We’re going to be rich Paola!’ He would say. ‘We’re never going to have to worry again.’ He was 22 at this point.”

“And he was right, we became rich. And not regular Rich, VERY rich. We became ultra wealthy. Millions and millions and millions of dollars within a few years. I would ask from time to time how

the markets were doing and he would always tell me, 'Don't worry Paola, I would never let anything happen to us, our family is going to be secure! Our children will be happy!' by the time your father was 30 he was worth more than our entire town put together. He was loved all through Germany and was a celebrated financier. People would spend days travelling and wait hours just to see him, just to get a tip. And it always paid off. I never questioned it because I was too busy spending.'

The joint had gone out and my mother had sat herself down in the chair she originally told me to sit in.

"Then one day we were at the park. Everyone knew who we were and everything was going so well. You were still in my tummy and I was about 4 months along. I just needed some air. And then the smell. Oh Peter the smell. It was like someone had taken my face and shoved it into a dead, rotting, carcass of a pig. I threw up instantly. Your father was white as a sheet. I turned and looked at him after gathering myself."

"We need to leave Paola, we need to leave now! Was all he said, he grabbed my arm and pulled me away. But standing no more than 10 feet in front of us was...your father. I almost fainted. If it wasn't for you giving me strength I would have. Your real father tried to turn us away, but when we turned around the creature, "your father," was standing behind us. It was impossible. Nothing moves like that. The creature started to move towards us. As he got closer, I saw that he was carrying a suitcase. And the smell became stronger and stronger. No one else in the park seemed to notice this, only us. It was a packed park and there was my husband standing in front of my husband and nothing seemed strange to anyone."

"This thing walked up to us, his eyes were almost bulging out of it's head, and the stench, oh god Peter the stench. We were both frozen in terror, your father's grip on my hand almost vice-like as the...as the Creature approached me. He extended his hand, everything about it looked normal except for his eyes. He extended his hand and placed it on my stomach, and rubbed it."

I was on the verge of passing out, what kind of deal did my parents make. What was going on, What the hell was all of this.

My mother continued.

"The creature spoke, it spoke just like your father, nothing was off, its voice was a perfect copy. 'When it is time, we will come. Your husband owes us, and we always collect our dues.' I passed out. I fainted straight to the ground. By the time I came to, about 10 people from the park had come to surround me and your father was leaning over me. I pulled myself up and we pretended that nothing had happened. The crowd dispersed and we went back to the bench we were sitting on. The Smell was gone. I screamed at your father when I knew I could. I asked him what was going on, what the hell that thing was and why was he rubbing my stomach."

"I was a fool! I was an arrogant, greedy fool, and now it's time to pay. Paola, the money, the houses, the cars, the...the...everything was based on a promise! Years ago while working at the bank I went out for a cigarette behind the building. I noticed a man standing there, he smelled awful and had a suitcase with him. Everyone in Europe was still poor and starving, and I felt sorry for him, I felt like I could help. No one should smell like that. I approached him and offered him something to eat. The man smiled back at me and said he was ok. I even offered him to come home and visit us, he was a straggler, he needed some help. I remember what my father told me about his life, sometimes we all need help! Oh Paola forgive me your father cried."

“Your father finished by telling me that the man put his hand on your father's shoulder and said he, your father, could have everythinghe dreamed of, because your father showed him kindness. The man promised your father that everything would be ok, that your father and I would make money, that anything your father touched would turn to gold. Your father thought the man was just crazy and was trying to be nice to him because he offered help. The next day your father’s stocks jumped. He didn’t have much but he saw he could buy a few more shares and hope for the best. And then they jumped again, and again and again. He go the taste of money and he liked it.”

“After the first few millions and everything him touching turning to gold, your father left the bank and started his own company. The day he moved into his new office in Hamburg his newly hired secretary told him an ‘old friend was here to see him.’ Your father had plenty of ‘old friends,’ hangers on, would-be millionaires, down on their luck businessmen, all wanting a piece of the pie. Your father told her to let him in, but the secretary said that the man wanted to meet your father outside."

"Your father sat there, and then the smell hit him. The stench coming off that man with the suitcase all those years ago, you don’t forget a smell like that. Your father hurried down the stairs to meet the man that had blessed him. How could someone who had told my father he would see luck be anything but wonderful? How could he be bad? Your father ran down into the streets, and there standing across the road was the man with the suitcase”

“Your father ran across the street, traffic be damned and followed the man who had started to move! ‘Sir, Friend, slow down! I want to thank you! Your kind words gave me everything! The man turned down another street and your father followed. Suddenly the man stopped and turned. He had the most awful bulging lip your father had seen. Much different from the last time he had seen him, but the awful smell was just the same. Thick and pungent.”

"‘Wilhelm, you’ve done so well for yourself, I’m happy you liked my gift', the man said. Your father was confused, he didn’t receive a gift from the man, only his good blessings. ‘What gift do you mean?’ asked your father. ‘Everything,” said the man, ‘We’ve given you everything, but if you’d like more, we can make that happen.’ Your father was a skeptical man, and never took anything for granted. When he told me this story he also relayed how this man could stare straight into his soul, he knew what your father wanted Peter, and that was money.”

“Wilhelm, we gave you the world, and we can give you more, all we ask is your equal payment. Millions, even billions of dollars, everything you’ve desired.’ The mans voice was calm and like a father. Your father wanted everything Peter, he wanted more than he could spend. Greed got the better of him."

"‘Another blessing my friend? Absolutely! I will take whatever you can give me." The man with the suitcase put his hand on your father’s shoulder and told him that when the time was right, everything would come to him, and everything would be equal. All would be equal. All debts must be paid, all dues must be collected. Your father didn’t agree nor disagree, but the man with the suitcase knew your father couldn’t resist. I just sat in that park bench, pregnant with you, holding my stomach, realizing what your father had done. I SWEAR Peter, I knew nothing until that point."

“And the years went by and the money got bigger. We never made billions, we were close in the 80s, but never hit it. For years after that we would have cryptically written clues show up around us: words inside books would rearrange themselves, random people would ask us if we had found our suitcase, messages on sales receipts, even once on the inside of your backpack when you were a

toddler. It stopped for a while, but I knew this day would come. The notes told us that they would only come after we died. After you had a chance at a life."

"And then your father died. We had never seen the man again, but we were never allowed to forget him. The day of your father's funeral I went to the bathroom in the funeral home to tidy myself up. I was alone until the smell. Oh god the smell. It came wafting through the vent. I thought for sure this was going to be where I died too, and frankly I wished it was. I tried to leave but the handle on the door wouldn't move. I turned around, and as if out of thin air, he was standing there. Your father, with the bulging eyes. I had stared at Wilhelm's cold body in that coffin all morning, and now there he was standing there. Until I saw the eyes Peter, I knew when I saw the eyes that the creature had come back."

"'Don't be afraid, I'm not here for you' he said in your father's voice. 'We only collect what we're owed. Wilhelm had a heart attack so the burden falls on you. You know what we want and we'll come and get it when the time was right.' I averted my eyes for a second, and he was gone. The door to the bathroom opened and I ran into the hall. I looked out the door and I could see him, the creature with the bulging eyes walking through the parking lot."

"Peter, they've come for their dues, and they expect payment."*

My mother walked off the balcony and I sat there. I didn't have questions, I was just in shock. I was told we were old money, that it was inherited from grandparents who died long before I was born. I had to confront the creature, and was going to, or live in terror forever.

She came back very quickly, crying softly, and just handed me a card. It was the business card from my father's first company. When he "shook hands' with the creature (so to speak) and mortgaged my life for his undeserved wealth.

New Beginnings Financial Investment Corporation

Part 5

NOTE 1: The next updated (the one after this one) will be the last part

NOTE 2 Thank you all.

I don't know how long I sat on the terrace. The morning was very brisk, especially for a July, but this was Toronto, and Canada has had some awful summers lately. I think I focused on the wind because it distracted me from the vacuum that my life had been thrown into. A gaping, sucking void from which there was evidently no escaping.

The creature was able to manifest in Germany, in Canada, in England, everywhere. My parents and I travelled extensively when I was younger, and where ever we had gone apparently the ghastly writing would follow. The notes never ended, mum and dad were never allowed to forget that their child had been bargained for a success that had happened overnight.

I finally stood. Actually that's a lie. I didn't have the ability to stand, I lurched myself out of the chair and proped myself up against the column that abutted the chair I sat in. I had smoked through almost an entire pack of cigarettes, and one of the night mades was nice enough to bring me two bottles of wine. I had lost all concept of time, it must have been about 430 in the morning at this point. I could see the occasional bird flying around, I knew dawn would soon wash away this godawful night. But then what?

I had all the money I could possibly ever need, and Christopher and I could just run away somwhere, but anywhere we went that thing would follow. And I didn't do anything to deserve it.

I had kicked the drug habit, I had reformed myself. Hell, I even made sure that in all of my wild years of sex and partying that I never contracted anything; safe sex. Always. But what was it all for? I should have just wasted away my life in some run down shit hole outside of Bern, or London, or Venice. I should have partied away my life and enjoyed what I had been sold for, before this reaper came to claim his prize. All debts must be paid, all dues must be collected.

I finally entered the condo and made my way to the east dining room and collapsed into one of the chairs. I was an angry man. An angry, bitter man. An angry, bitter, drunk man. Who had to teach a class in a matter of hours. That definitely wasn't going to happen. How the fuck was I going to go to school again? To go about my life? To do anything?

Christopher and I had planned so many good years to come. Children, a vacation home, retiring, endless travel. How could I do any of that now? How could I do this to Christopher? Children were certainly out of the picture, and there was no way I could have Christopher constantly looking over his shoulder for the day that his double would finally just come and...take me.

God, to know that I was claimed.

The staff turned over at 5am, and I saw two of the maids changing out of their uniforms and into their regular clothes. I knew that I had to start tackling this, but how the hell would I go about even starting? How would I deal with this.

I reached for my phone. The class was at 830 and if I sent out a broadcast message to my students, I would save a good number of them the annoyance of coming to an 830 class, only to find that their professor wasn't there.

2% battery life. That's all I had left in my phone. I had to find a charger. I hit the page button, and

luckily Sylvie hadn't clocked out yet. I asked her, my breath smelling of Chateauneuf de Pape (a good vintage at least), and my words slurred, if she could source me a charger for my iPhone. She could see that I was in distress and had no doubt overheard the conversation between my mother, Anthony, Christopher and I earlier on that night (morning?).

She disappeared momentarily and came back, charger in hand. God I loved her, she was such a useful person. Like I had been, before any utility in my life had been so unceremoniously stripped away.

"Here you are Dr. Tillman. You should check your phone, he doesn't like to be kept waiting." She dropped the charger on the table, and left the room. I was drunker than I realized, but I understood what she said. Within a few seconds of her leaving the room, the famous tritone that all iphone users are familiar with sounded.

It was an area code 647 number.

ittsS Kolde enN dahH TerIce.

I sobered up instantly. This was it. He was here. He was outside, and he knew that I knew what he wanted.

I stood up and turned towards the hallways leading to the terrace. I hesitantly made my way down to the wall of windows that opened up to one of the absolute best views the city had to offer.

Money, it buys so many things, and nothing at all.

I made my way to the door and turned the handle. If I wasn't sober before, the smell that came rushing into my nostrils certainly fixed that problem. I could smell him near. The same burning at the back of the throat, the same apprehensive feeling, the same taste of rotten flesh filling my mouth. Except this time I understood him. I understood that he wanted me.

The terrace wraps around the corner of the building at which point it stops and the terrace of the adjoining apartment begins. My mum's took over 3/4 of the floor space and Mrs. Thompson-Fitch, wife of the advertising magnate (4th wife to be exact) owned the remaining 1/4.

I turned the corner, away from the view of the living room. The sun was slowly rising, and it was blue out. You know that time of morning where the sun begins to creep above the horizon, it wasn't quite dawn, but it wasn't quite night.

I could see the creature standing at the far end of the terrace, back towards me. I froze. I was filled with the bravado of a wronged man leading up to the turn, but now was consumed with dread. Was this it? Was my life going to be claimed now? Was the debt to be collected? I stopped moving forward.

And then in the Christopher's voice, in the voice of the man that I loved so much, the voice of the man who I would give everything for, the creature spoke.

"Hello Peter."

I couldn't respond. I just stood there and waited to die.

"Hello Peter."

Again, no response from me. I couldn't bring myself to do it, I couldn't bring myself to talk or even to feel at this point. Every atom in my existence was vibrating with fear. No excuses.

"Hello Peter. I would appreciate a response." The creature seemed to be getting impatient. 'Chris'

wanted to talk.

“Hel” was the only thing I could manage to get out. I was so exhausted, so weak, so drained, so...well so everything. All emotions that I had ever experienced in the negative sat on me like some kind of massive stone, waiting to crush me. Nothing happy, nothing contentful, nothing peaceable. Just the dead weight of a ruined life.

The smell still lingered in the air, thick and acrid. Like that smell of burnt hair.

“Paola spoke with you, she told you the deal” The creature continued, back still towards me, no sign of movement on his part. I still couldn’t speak. Facing the back of him was like facing the back of every failed moment in my life, mixed with a terror so visceral and real you could cut it with a knife.

“She told you half the story. You should ask Christopher the other half.” He said, still sounding exactly like Christopher. Like he was referring to himself in the third person. And then he turned around.

I could see the lip from 50 feet away. It had burst at this point, and oozed a thick black substance that ran down the front of his coat. It looked a mixture of tar and water. Black enough to be tar, but flowed like water. Like dead, necrotized blood.

I backed up, but there really wasn’t much of place to back up. This sight terrified and burned me. It was like watching Christopher in pain, but knowing that it wasn’t Christopher somehow didn’t seem to help.

He advanced forward.

I was backed against the wall. I had no where to go, and as if controlled by another, my legs failed me. I couldn’t bring myself to run left or right. The creature continued to advance forward. I noticed how much his walk was like Christopher's, with that stupid sort of dip that Christopher does when he walk’s slow; a result of too many high jumps off of cliffs into water when he was a teenager.

I shut my eyes. Like a child attempting to get away from a terrible sight, the smell of the creature getting stronger and stronger with each advancing step. I could feel hot, fresh tears streaming down my face. I was crying, not out of fear but out of hoplessness. I had so many things that I wanted to do, I had so many wishes that I tried so hard to fullfill. All that was gone, and the only thing left was a blank IOU, waiting to be signed by whatever this creature walking towards me was.

He stopped within arms reach and raised his right hand to my face. The smell was almost unbearable. It was unbearable. I could feel myself dry heaving. I had smelled this stench several times in the past 24 hours, and this time the proximity brought me even closer to vomiting. I still hadn’t opened my eyes, hoping beyond hope that somehow this would magic the creature out of existence, and I would wake up, next to my Christopher, heaving and panting after some kind of acrobatic lovemaking session.

The creature placed his hand on my cheek. It was warm and exactly like Christopher’s touch. That touch that had lifted me off the floor of the kitchen at the houseparty where first met. That touch that had held my hand when I stood in front of my parents and confirmed that we were getting married. That touch that had held me close the moments before my doctoral thesis defence. That touch which had held my face on the beach in the Seychelles and pulled me to his after saying “I do.”

It was that last thought that made me open my eyes.

The fact that I knew what I had, and I knew what I could lose in an instant if I didn't cooperate. It was the single most terrifying thing that I had experienced so far. To be that close the one that wanted to claim me. I fainted, and hit my head on the concrete tile. hard.

“Oh my god! Peter, Darling, my Son! Please wake up!” I could see three blurry figures leaning over me, and could feel that I was still obviously outside. My head was pounding and it took a few seconds for my vision to settle. It was Christopher, Anthony, and my Mother.

I shot up. Standing straight upright. It was bright and hot outside, like a regular July day. How long had I been passed out for?

I backed away from them, no longer knowing what was real, and what had been the creatures doing. I hadn’t forgot a thing. I turned and looked at Christopher.

"WHICH ONE ARE YOU? ARE YOU REAL? DO YOU WANT ME? WHAT DID YOU WANT ME TO DO? HOW AM I PAYING FOR THIS? WHY DID, HOW. FUCK YOU!” I collapsed onto the ground crying like a child. My mother came near me, and I started to scream. Scream like a parent whose just been told that their child had died, scream like a husband who made it out of the house only to watch his wife die in the ensuing fire, screamed like a man who had nothing left to live for.

“YOU DID THIS, THIS WAS YOUR FUCKING FAULT, AND HIS. FUCK YOU ALL, I NEVER DID THIS. YOU SOLD ME. YOU LIED TO ME!! DAD FUCKING SOLD ME.” I stood up again, but once more, like being drunk on the terrace, I braced myself against the wall. I was still crying, almost uncontrollably. Anthony came towards me, and I leaned all my weight on him. The poor man, I was almost a foot taller, but he bore my full frame; soldier carrying comrade through the jungles of Vietnam. No man left behind.

He put me into a chair, and just hugged me. I was hyperventilating, and he straddled my legs, and pressed his face into mine

“Look at me Peter. LOOK AT ME! Just count now. 1-2-3-4. 1-2-3-4. 1-2-3-4. Just breathe” Anthony was a small man, but I could see in that moment why he was a good physician. He took control of me in a way reserved for lovers and those I apparently owed debts to.

It took about three minutes but Anthony finally moved off of me and I regained composure. My mind was still racing, but my body was finally under control. The hyperventilating had stopped, I was starting to regain composure, as best as I could. I looked down at my watch and it read 7am. Good, early.

“I have two surgeries today, are you going to be ok to be here without me?” Anthony, my saviour in that moment, asked while still within arm’s reach.

“Yeah, I think I’ll be fine, can you come back when you’re done?” I asked him.

“Sure, no problem, my last one is at 3pm, I should be able to walk back over in 10 minutes. I’ll call from the hospital when I get there and when I’m leaving, just in case I don’t show up here.” Anthony's composure was very reassuring.

Anthony continued, “I love you man, don’t worry, we’ll sort this out.” I smiled as he turned and walked off the terrace, one of the day maids walking behind him.

“You need to cancel your class.” Christopher said with authority.

“You need to explain to me what you know.” I shot back at him. He was right, I did need to cancel my

class, but I wanted answers more than anything. The creature had told me that Christopher knew more than he was letting on, and I wanted to get to the bottom of this.

“What do you mean?” Christopher asked, with an obvious look of concern painted across his face.

“You know what I mean Christopher. After you fell asleep last night, mum told me everything.” I continued in an almost cartoonish fashion to recite the events that transpired after Christopher went into the shower. From my mother telling me the truth, to meeting the Creature, to being advised that the love of my life had not told me what he knew. Almost all in one breath. I felt like was going to start hyperventilating again, but gathered myself knowing that Anthony wasn’t there to be my knight in shining armour.

“Peter,I don’t know what you’re talking about. What you mean you met the Creature? Did he look like me? What did he say to you about me?” Christopher gave himself away.

My eyes narrowed, I was on the verge of physically attacking him, “What do you mean, 'what did he say to you about me?!' Christopher, so fucking help me god, tell me what you know. I deserve the truth!” I was screaming again, I was having a full blown mental breakdown. My family was bargaining me like a pawn, and no one had the balls to tell me the truth.

I had spent my life searching for the truth. Physics tries to understand the mechanics of this world, and to make sense of the anomalies that arise. Gamma Ray bursts, lenticular clouds, holes appearing in the ground in Russia. Our job was to take the mystical and bring it into the world of the real. To bring the impossible into the possible. This was impossible. Nothing I knew was real anymore.

“Dr. Meagan wasn’t real.” Chris said bluntly.

“What?” I asked in a confused fashion. The name had rang a bell, but I wasn’t connecting the dots.

Christopher finally opened up and told me the truth.

“Peter, I never went to sleep last night, your mother left you on the terrace and came inside crying. I met her in the library, drinking by herself and started talking to her. She told me everything. The one thing we couldn’t figure out was why the creature looked like me. The fact that it resembled your father made sense, he had made the deal, but the fact that this iteration looked like me threw us both. We couldn’t come up with a reason, until I thought about your drug usage”

“I am NOT to blame for this, I fucked up my youth and had to work long and hard through rehab to get the fuck out of that situation! You have NO idea what I went through!” I shot back. That was my biggest personal triumph, I have nothing left in my life, and I felt like Christopher was robbing me of that as well.

Fuck defending my doctoral thesis, and being offered tenure, dragging myself up by my bootstraps, fixing my addiction problems was my greatest triumph.

“You died Peter.” Christopher bluntly said

I didn’t know what to make of that statement, I had no clue what he was talking about.

“What the hell do you mean? I mean, sure there were blackout periods, but I never fucking flatlined.” I scathingly threw back at him.

“You’re the love of my life. You’re the reason that I get up in the morning. There are weeks when I work 70 hours, but to know that I’ll come home to your perfect body (my body was far from perfect), and your beautiful face, and your gorgeous smell (I did smell pretty awesome). Just thinking about you

makes me know that I found the one that gave me the reason to continue living. The one that drives me to succeed, and the one that I want to hold my hand as I close my eyes for the last time, and leave this world. That's what you mean to me."

Christopher was crying at this point.

"We found one another when you were at your worst. You were a strung out tweaker (drug slang for one who does a tonne of meth and then parties for days) that I helped up off the floor of the kitchen at a house party: you told me that I had the most beautiful eyes that you had ever seen. You made me realize that I was worth something. Peter when you met me I was so confused, I hated myself for liking men, and my parents' hate equaled mine. I had no drive to continue, but even in your drug-addled state, you knew how to make me feel like I was worth it. I fell in love with you, the only time I had truly been in love. When you were sober, you were the best, and when you were high, you fucked like a god and I loved it, but I lost you in those moments of all consuming drug binges"

I was crying at this point. I loved Christopher, and this reminded me why.

"There was one particularly terrible night. We had spent the afternoon together and had lunch at Barberien, and spent the afternoon walking along the harbourfront, it was a beautiful day. You left me and told me that you were going to meet David, your dealer, and my heart sank. When I had you, I had you, but when I let you go, you let yourself go."

I just stared at Christopher, my mother was weeping, and covering her mouth. Evidently Christopher had told her this story earlier on that morning.

Christopher continued.

"About 10pm that night, I tried calling you and you weren't answering. I got a terrible feeling, even at your worst you always answered me. Even if the only thing I could hear was the pounding base of whatever god awful club you decided to tweak the night away in. But that night, I got no answer. I tried several times, and around 11pm I finally gave up and called your parent's house. One of the night staff answered and advised me that you had been rushed to the hospital. You were at St. Michael's."

I recalled bits and pieces of the night he was referring to, but only truly remembered regaining consciousness in the hospital bed, feeling perfectly fine. I remembered my mother mentioning how much she loved Dr. Meagan for bringing me back, but that was it.

"I raced down the Gardiner Expressway, going over 150km per hour. I didn't know what I was doing. I had had a couple of drinks with my friends, and was pretty tipsy, it's pretty amazing that I didn't crash on the way there. I sped into the parking lot and ditched my father's Bentley in the entryway and just ran into the hospital. I found the Emergency room, and at first they refused to let me see you. Thats when I saw your mother. She was sitting in a chair, babbling to herself, talking about how you shouldn't climb so high on the monkey bars because you would fall and scrape your knee."

"In hindsight I realize that the hospital stank, it reeked exactly like the King Edward Hotel, exactly like the inside of our BMW in the parking lot. It wasn't until I was speaking with your mother last night that I remembered that. I guess in the moment I had blocked it out. I always hated hospitals, and I knew I had to get to you."

I looked at my mother, she looked away.

"I ran up to your mother, and crouched down so we were face to face. I asked her what was wrong, and she just kept saying 'Wilhelm, keep an eye on him, if he falls, he could scrape his knee!' She was

completely incoherent, and I expected the worst. I ran into the tirage room where a terribly fat woman was complaining about hemorrhoids. The nurse yelled at me to leave, and I backed out of the room. An attending physician, Dr. Patel, finally found me in the hallway and led me away, firm hand on my shoulder."

One of the day maids had brought up a tray of juices and a tumbler of gin (it was a family tradition, if we were going to drink at 8am, family rules dictated that it be gin). My mother had poured herself a rather large drink, and invited the poor maid to have one too. She rebuffed mum, but finally gave in.

Christopher, gin in hand, continued telling the story.

"Dr. Patel walked me to where your mother was sitting. By this point your mother had been moved into a seperate waiting room. She kept staring at the empty chair next to her and saying 'He's going to be a physicist you know, guaranteed to win a nobel prize!' She didn't even realize that myself nor the doctor had entered the room. I was directed to a chair and that's when my world ended."

"He looked at me and said, 'Peter died from an overdoes at approximately 10pm tonight.' My world collapsed Peter. I understood why your mother, now showing the imaginary person sitting in the seat next to her the baby pictures she carried around in her wallet, was acting the way she was. It was like someone had reached into me and ripped my stomach out through my mouth. I broke down and started to cry. The time was almost 11pm at this point. You had been dead for almost an hour."

I didn't know what to say, what to do, or how to continue. I had died for an hour? Medically speaking, this was impossible. Where was Anthony when I needed him?! Oh right, relieving intracranial pressure in a four year old. It's impossible to recover from an hour of death. But the rest of Christopher's story made me understand better what was going on. He continued speaking,even though his voice was breaking down.

" Dr. Patel left the room. I had never felt more alone. He promised that he would return shortly after doing his rounds, and that I should contact a loved one to pick me up from the hospital. That's when Dr. Meagan entered the room."

"She was a Filipino woman, about 5'6 with short black hair. She put her arm around me and apologized for what I was going through. In hindsight, I now realize that she looked slightly strange, like if her lip was slightly bigger, but nothing I cared about in that moment. The smell was also probably there, however in that moment the entire Santa Clause parade could have marched past me and I wouldn't have noticed. She put her hand on my leg and said, 'we can bring him back.'"

"I was floored, I didn't know that you could bring someone back from over an hour of death. Of course I said, of course I want to! Please! She removed her hand from my leg and looked me in her eyes, there was a strange coldness to the whole thing, but I didn't care, I just wanted you back."

" 'It'll be difficult, but I think we can do it.' Dr. Meagan told me. I didn't care, I couldn't watch your mother go through this, I couldn't go through this. I wanted you back. Do what you need to do, I told Dr. Meagan."

" 'Ok, but remmeber, all debts need to be paid, and all dues are collected.' Dr Meagan said, without breaking eye contact. I just figured that this was some bullshit 'Take care of yourself' thing that Physicians said to the relatives of drug addicts so that we could scold you when they woke you. She left the room again, and came back about 20 minutes later."

I did not recall any of this, I do not recall anything. I was floored. Who was this miracle physician

that had brought me back from the other side of the death?

“ ‘You can come see him now, but you must bring his mother.’ She held the door open and pointed us in the direction of your room."

"I found it strange when I entered that you were almost...almost...normal. Like nothing had happened to you. You were sitting up in bed just staring at the wall, waiting for us to walk in. I walked in and gave you the biggest kiss I had ever given you. Your mother snapped back to reality and threw her arms around you, ‘Oh mein Liebling Sohn! Ich werde dich nie gehen lassen (oh my darling son, I’ll never let you go)’ she exclaimed. Within five minutes Dr. Patel had returned to your room, reviewed your chart and gave us a smile. "Ah, another debt," was all he said and left the room, we didn't care what he had to say, we had you back. Dr. Meagan was a miracle worker. And that was it.”

“ You entered rehab within 2 days of being discharged from the hospital and never once went back to the drug. It was a miracle, you were virtually cured. About three months later I returned to the hospital with a large bouquet of roses for Dr. Meagan, this woman had brought you back from the brink of death. I went to the administration office and asked for her. The hospital had never employed a Dr. Meagan, and the only female physician named Meagan who worked there in the past year was a rather rotund Chinese woman who looked nothing like the doctor that saved you that night.I never told anyone this. I figured that an angel had brought you back to us. Now I realized that it was something far different."

I interjected at this point, "If the doctor was chirping on about debts, how the hell did none of this ring a bell to you before, Mother? You must have known what was going on!" I was glaring at my mother, red hot from the hatred that was starting to build for my family, but also from the hatred I had for myself for putting myself in that situation.

My mother helplessly looked at me and said, "Peter, we had lived with this thing since before you were born, there is no questioning it's intentions, and I promised your father years before that I would never say a word about the debt to anyone. What was I supposed to do? Tell Christopher, who I barely knew at that point, "oh my son is claimed by a magical man that follows us around the world?!"

This was the first time my mother had gotten angry at me after telling me the truth. I deserved it.

Christopher contined.

“You were meant to die, you had selfishly wasted your life, but the creature intervened. Your father’s debt was not meant to be collected until after both your parents died, but you beat them to the punch. You died before your mother, and the creature refused to accept this, I imagine, so by brining you back, you yourself mortgaged your own life Peter, not me. Dr. Meagan could have let you die, the creature could have let you die, but you were offered redemption through me, and I knew you wanted it. I wanted you. ”

“I’m sorry Peter, but you actually mortgaged your life,I was only the poor fucker that had to beg for it on your behalf. I had to be the greedy one in that moment, I had to beg for a life that had been so selfishly thrown away!”

Suddenly the entire terace filled with the same smell and all of us turned to the right. The creature was at the far end, appearing out of nowhere.

He looked over at us, put the suitcase down, and opened it.

Part 6

NOTE 1 Thank you all so much for your support and caring through all of this. It's been of immeasurable help.

NOTE 2 Thank you to the kind stranger who gave my last post gold, and brought more attention to my plight.

NOTE 3 Never forget what I went through. Never.

The most blinding, ethereal light I had experienced in my life emitted from the inside of the suitcase. I don't know what else I expected. A dead body, a massive amount of blood, my father's corpse. I don't know what, but the light shone brighter than anything I had ever experienced.

I was knocked off of my feet, flat on my ass, but luckily this time I was able to avoid my head making friends with the cement tiles, and maintained consciousness. My eyes adjusted. I looked around, I was still on the terrace, but my mother and my Christopher were not. I scrambled to my feet, my palms were bruised from bracing myself from the fall, and I wiped the flecks of blood, that started to pool on the heel of my hand, on my pants.

I looked over to where the creature was standing and he was still there. He was still shaped like Christopher, and his lip was still burst. He raised his hand and made the "come here" gesture with his finger. Beckoning me.

I ran in the opposite direction, around the corner and back through the door into the condominium.

"CHRISTOPHER! MUM! WHERE ARE YOU?!" I was frantic. Had this been the payment that the creature was seeking? Was he going to take everything that I loved in the world just for money? My mother's laugh and Christopher's smile was worth more than any amount of money could buy; if they were gone, I could see no reason to live, no reason to continue. A swan dive off of the terrace onto the hot albeit comforting sidewalk 40+ stories below, would have been the choice I would have opted for.

Why the fuck did one woman need so much space. That was the only thought that echoed in my mind as I ran through hallway upon hallway screaming for both of them. I ran into my mother's room, and up the stairs behind her bed to the second floor area, that had it's own balcony. Maybe I had passed out and she had run to where it was considered to be safe.

We had done drills when she first moved in of where she would go if someone broke in and tried to kill her or hold her ransom, and the second floor balcony in her bedroom was always considered the furthest from the main entrance. But nothing, she wasn't there. I couldn't find her anywhere.

Christopher and I had stayed at the condo while our bedroom was being refinished, so he was intimately acquainted with the place. I ran from bedroom to bedroom screaming like a mad man, almost begging him to emerge. But nothing.

I started to run out of breath, snot and flem pouring from my nose and mouth respectively. Fuck why did I smoke so much.

"CHRISTOPHER!!!!!!!" With the last ounce of strength that I had I screamed. I bellowed. I begged. But nothing, just sheer unadulterated silence.

I refused to give up. I ran out the main entrance and down the hallway. I pounded on Mrs. Thompson-Fitch's door, screaming for her. Maybe in a mad dash, Christopher and my mother had run there.

Nothing, no answer, no response. The old bitch was a terrible person, dripping with jewels and attitude, but I begged and prayed that she would answer her door. I kept pounding, but I never got the response I was so desperately seeking.

My mind raced to alternatives. The Fire Alarm! If I couldn't find my family, I would throw the whole fucking building in a panic! I raced to where the elevator was and pulled the alarm. Dead silence. $15,000 a month in condo fees and the fucking alarm wasn't working! This was bullshit. I hit the elevator button but it refused to light up. I was running out of options, and fast.

I decided that even though my smoker's lungs had failed me while I was running through the apartment, my best bet was to run down the stairs and have one of the valets call the cops. I had tried my hardest to avoid involving the police, since evidently my own family was the source of this newfound misery. I bolted for the stairwell door and grabbed the handle.

Touching the handle seared my hand. Badly. "FUCK!" I screamed and looked at my palm, the scrapes from bracing myself from the fall on the terrace were virtually cauterized. No more bleeding, but my hand was badly burned.

I took my shirt off and wrapped it around my other hand, hoping that this would allow me to turn the knob. I reached for the handle again, less hot but still burning. It refused to turn. The creature was refusing to let me leave. I sat on the ground, I didn't know what other options I had, I had to face him.

I picked myself up after a minute or two and headed back into my mother's place. As I entered the condo, I realized that not only were Christopher and my mother missing, but so was everyone else. None of the staff were there, no one was.

"Sylvie! Astrid!" I screamed, but no one answered. I realized that I was truly alone. No one was there. I walked back through the maze of corridors and came up to the wall of windows. I walked outside, to the edge of the terrace. I thought about jumping and wanted to ensure that if I did throw myself off, I wouldn't land on someone's balcony. I refused to live in a world without Christopher or my mother. As much of a momma's boy that that made me sound like, losing the two people that I loved the most in the world was too much to handle.

I placed my hands on the railing and leaned over. The building was a highrise in Toronto and I should have seen thousands of cars and people going about their regular lives, unaware of the insane happenings transpiring above them. But there was nothing.

If MY eyes could bulge out of my head they certainly would at that point. There were no other people. No one. I looked into the glass facades of the buildings that surrounded me, and there was no one. There were living rooms with empty sofas, beds that were unmade with no one occupying them, and parking lots that were completely empty. There was no one. What kind of limitless power did this thing have? Could I even kill myself? I had no one left in the world that cared about me. There was nothing but the desolation of an empty soul to confront. I refused to go on. It had been less than two days and my life had been ripped away from me. If you live in a warzone, you cling to your home, your pictures, your loved ones, your affectations. You cling to a cause. I had no causes left.

I propped myself up onto the ledge and sat on the balustrade that ran the entire length of the terrace; my feet dangled over. I kicked off one of shoes to make sure that it would fall, and it tumbled effortlessly to the ground. I had lost my mind and had no way of regaining it. If this thing could strip away everything I loved just by opening a suitcase, what was worth fighting for?

“You may want to take a look inside the suitcase before you decide to do that.”

It was Christopher’s voice. I knew it was the creature, but hearing that voice made me turn around. I hoped beyond all possibility and all reality that when I turned around my man would be standing there. I slowly turned my head, and there he was, 20 feet behind me. The creature, covered in the black, oozing blood.

I stared at him over my shoulder, my feet still hanging off the terrace.

“What do you want?” I said in a tone just above a whisper, there was no strength left to scream.

The creature advanced towards me and said in that beautiful voice: “We want to settle your debts. We brought you back before, and if you think that this can be evened out by simply jumping, you’re far less intelligent than the degrees we allowed you to have would insinuate.”

I chuckled almost silently. ‘Allowed me to have.’ He was right. Everything I had earned and everything that I had accomplished, and even everything I had failed at was simply at the behest of this creature and his kind.

Me: What are you? How can you do this? Are you a devil?

The creature quietly chuckled and advanced even closer to me. I wasn’t filled with dread anymore, just an overwhelming sense of resignation.

The Creature spoke.

“We are what you humans refer to as fate. We are the hand that guides. We are the power that makes it be. Your world and our's overlap one another, like water on a pane of glass. You see right through us, and when the time is right, just when the time is right, we even out the score.”

”We are charged by the universe with the ultimate responsibility of ensuring that an equality is struck. That no one, man, woman, beast, is endowed with the ability to achieve more than they are capable of. When you a see father rip off a door to save his child from a burning vehicle, we have allowed that to occur. And in the same vein, when an infant dies from cancer, we are the ones that take that life. When you walk across that stage, holding that Nobel Prize, we are the ones that have allowed your research to succeed. And in the same vein, when a nuclear missile strikes a city and wipes thousands off the face of the Earth in a blink of an eye, we are the force that allows the trigger to activate.”

I had so many questions. I swung around and sat facing the condo, feet now hanging safely over the terrace floor. “Who is we?”

The creature smiled Chris’s smile, but without the lips that I so longed to feel again.

“There are many of us, however we operate as one. We do not see the need for division, since efficiency is our tool of choice. We tend to appear in a pleasing form, your father to your mother, your Cristopher to you, Dr. Meagan to your Christopher. Our only tell is that when we leave our world and enter yours, our intentions are laid bare.”

I was on the verge of understanding. “What do you mean your intentions are laid bare? Is it the smell?”

The creature continued,

“Yes, it is the smell. What you smell is not rotting flesh, though it may appear as such when tested by your human science. We have no need for flesh, but the stench of rotting possibilities. The smell of

overwhelming poverty that your parents should have been subjected to, the acrid odour of a life wasted consuming drugs, and the overpowering fragrance of every failure you had ever encounter and undertaken. Christopher Smells your death, you smell your wasted life, your mother smells poverty, the woman at the Hotel (I presumed he was referring to the clerk) smells the stench of an affair she wished she never had, Anthony smells the stench of a hit and run that was never reported."

The small child in the Tim Hortons wasn't repelled by the creature's smell, because she was too young to know the stench of failure, the pungent scent of unfair advantage. She instead focused on his grotesque lip. It was making sense.

"Then why does your lip bleed?" It was the only thing about the creature's physical appearance that remained a mystery.

"Because we pay a price too. Nothing in existence goes unchecked, and until we remove the imbalances that we are charged to rectify, until we collect all debts, until we ensure payment of all dues, we suffer the consequences of inequality as well. We rot and fester until the ledger is made balanced. Until a fine, delicate, even measure is struck."

"Why can't your write like us?" I had to know. "We do not write. We manipulate the fabric of your world to generate the notes and the messages that we send. It allows us to remind you of the unevenness, of the urge to rectify, without having to visit you. Everyone owes a debt, not only you."

I couldn't help but lock eyes with him through this entire period. He was explaining himself, and apparently all I needed to do was ask. A physicists worst nightmare is not asking a question when it is required, and I had confronted that fear head on.

"But you or your kind, or whatever the right phrase would be made the deal with my father, you made the deal with Christopher for my life. How can you claim to be some great force that brings equality when you yourselves brought about the unbalance in the first place!" This was the first time that I spoke to the creature with anger.

"Never over estimate your worth. Even if you are tempted by fate. Never take a deal without understanding that you do not deserve an advtange, and not just you. Everyone" The creature rattled this off as if he had been asked it many times before.

"So, how do I even the balance? How do I equate the ledger?" I asked, no longer filled with fear but an all consuming need to bring finality to this situation.

"Everything you have must be ours. Everything you own must be given back." The creature said, in Christopher's calm, soothing voice.

"Do I die?" I asked in an almost childlike fashion.

"Do you wish to even the score?" The creature asked.

"Do you often ask?" I retorted.

"Do you wish to pay your debts, do you wish to even the score?" The creature asked again, almost in an a monotonous tone this time. He could feel the finality of his mission approaching, and the balance in this situation being restored.

"Yes." I had no choice, this was the only answer I could give. If he could empty a city by opening a suitcase, what was left for me?

"Follow me," the creature commanded.

I dismounted the balustrade and walked 5 feet behind the creature. We turned the corner, and there, still shining with the light of a thousand sun's was the suitcase. He pointed at it, and nodded his head.

As I approached the suitcase, I realized that the light was bearable. My eyes no longer hurt, and the light consumed me, instead of simply blinding me. I looked deep inside. It was like looking at a television, a display of sorts. I could see countless other debts, both collected and outstanding.

Joseph P. Kennedy (JFK's father), billions over night, daughter died in tragic plane accident at 27. A woman who resembled Mrs. Thompson-Fitch, endless wealth won in a divorce, even though she was unfaithful, cancer by 65. Terminal. A bumbling fool of a man who looked like a young version of my father watching a stock ticker bring him closer to unimaginable wealth. Anthony, crying in a car after mowing down a 9 year old while on vacation in Italy. And a million others.

"What is this?" I asked, absolutely fascinated and mortified

"It's what allows us to even the score. You give yourself to us by entering it, and we remove the debt." He calmly said.

"I have to get into it?" There was no longer strength left to be surprised, or to be distraught. If I had to give my life, give everything that I love and everything that I hold dear in order for this debt to be removed, for the world to reach a balance, and for my Christopher to go about living his life, even without me, it was what needed to happen. I would no longer have peace in my life. I would no longer have my life, if I failed to comply.

I set one foot inside and fell through.

Cigarettes and old paper. That was the only thing that I smelled. My vision was blurry but slowly cleared. I was sitting at my desk, in my office at the University. I looked around and everything seemed... Well everything seemed normal.

I shot out of my chair and backed up against the wall. I felt my face, my arms, my legs, my dick, everything. I touched myself everywhere I could. Was that it? All I needed to do was step foot inside of a suitcase and this debt was evened out? Or maybe I had died and this was what the other side of existence felt like.

I ran out of my office and towards the exit of the building. I bolted outside and could feel the hot July sun beating down on my face. I looked at my watch and saw that it was 11:30am July 31, 2014.

I kept running as fast as I could, losing my breath but still pushing myself. I had to see my family, I had to see my mum, I had to see my Christopher.

I darted to my car, and hit the auto-open button. The beep beep that it made when the automatic starter unlocked the locks stopped me. The creature. The last few days. It couldn't have been a dream. This is insane. What the hell happened to my life.

I entered the car and took a deep breath. No smell, no stench. Maybe all of the years of doing drugs did in fact catch up to me, and this was a delayed delusion. The German-Accented Siri type assistant that accepted voice commands in the car actived.

"Hello Dr. Blochbauer, the weather today is 28 degree, your estimated time of travel is thirty minutes"

"CALL CHRISTOPHER!!!!!!" I screamed at her.

“Calling Mother,” she recited back.

Typical, I thought. At lleast the inaccuracy of that interaction made me believe that this was reality. If I was dreaming, the damn thing would have worked perfectly.

The phone was ringing, and Sylvie’s comforting voice answered.

“Hello Dr. Blochbauer, your mother is reading on the terrace, would you like to speak with her?”

‘Reading’ this early? oh well, who cares, she was there! She was alive! She wa...

My mind stopped. Everything froze. I slammed on the brakes. Luckily no one was behind me or I could have caused a serious accident.

“Sylvie what did you call me?” I asked.

“Dr. Blochbauer...I’m sorry, would you prefer Peter.” She innocently responded.

My wedding ring was gone.

“Sylvie, Where’s Christopher?” I was starting to hyperventilate. I didn’t know what was happening. Why was she calling me by my maiden name, where was my RING!?

“I’m Sorry Dr. Blochbauer, I don’t know who Christopher is.”.....I stared blankly at the windshield, what was going on? What price did I pay.

“Dr. Blochbauer.....Dr. Blochbauer....Peter? Are you there?” Sylvie repeated the question, but I still didn’t answer. I hung up the phone by clicking the button on the steering wheel and floored the accelerator. 204 km per hour appeared on the digital readout as I tore down the highway to the house that we shared.

I finally slowed down at Yonge street and exited the highway. The light was red at the end of the ramp, and I hit the voice activated assistant button again.

“CALL CHRISTOPHER!” I screamed at her.

“Calling mother” She replied in her sterile, German tone. I hung up the call.

I held down the home button on my iphone and the famous di-dit of Siri sounded, “CALL CHRISTOPHER” I said.

“I don’t see Christopher in your address book, should I look for locations by that name?” Was the only thing she said. The light turned green.

I tore through the streets of Toronto, laws be damned, and turned onto my street. I had to swerve to miss the 12 year old blonde on her bicycle. As my house drew nearer, I could see that the Garage door was opening. CHRISTOPHER MUST BE HOME!!!! This relieved me.

I made a hard right turn into the driveway and froze.

There in the middle of my garage was the suitcase. Tattered, worn, but no smell. I didn’t smell the creature. Nothing.

I ran into the house. It was different. The decor was the same, but the pictures on the wall featured me and my friends doing things that I did not remember at all. Me with Sonya at a fashion show. Myself with Bing running the Boston Maraton, Sumentha and I having lunch in Paris. But that was it, no pictures of Christopher and I. NOTHING.

I started to pant. To gasp. I was losing my mind. NO NO NO NO NO, not again, please not again, I didn’t want to go through this again, I thought it was finished.

I ran into the garage and the suitcase was gone. I ran back into the house, unbelievably hoping to see the creature to ask what was going on. But nothing. I ran up to the bedroom that we had shared, only my clothing was in the closet. Nothing of Christopher's was there. Christopher wasn't there. Christopher hadn't been there. Ever.

Where both our degrees hung, only hung my string of degrees, set in the middle instead of at the top of the wall. No room for his.

I ran into the living room, and pulled what should have been our wedding album off the shelf. Instead of the cream coloured leather front, it was red plastic. The Seychelles, The potential adoption, the trips to Venice, the Love, the fucking Love! What did I do!?

I flipped open the album. Again, just pictures of me and my friends, pictures of me and men I didn't recognize. Pictures of me kissing the occasional man and more pictures of my friends. Nothing of Christopher.

I flipped to the last page, only one word. I Dropped the album and collapsed, weeping on the ground.

KoLLEcted

Hey, /r/relationships, I finally took the plunge and signed up for Tinder. Any advice for a dating newbie with overprotective parents?

by _pancaste_

First Runner Up - August Monthly Contest

Part 1

First of all, let me say that I'm kind of new to reddit. I'm not even completely sure if I've formatted this post correctly, or how to post to the right forum, or what. Honestly, I'm just looking for some friendly advice. I can't talk to anyone I know in "real life" about this (I'll explain that later), so any help would be appreciated. Apologies in advance for any spelling mistakes, I'm on my phone!

I got on Tinder about a week after I turned eighteen, so about a month ago. I've always been more on the quiet side. No parties or wild nights for me, unless you count that time I fell down the stairs at two in the morning on my way to get a glass of water. So back in June, I officially entered adulthood without having done so much as hold a guy's hand. Already, there are tons of stereotypes about homeschooled kids - we're all socially awkward freaks or weirdly religious, according to Mean Girls (I've watched clips of it on YouTube!). I'm tired of fulfilling even one of the stereotypes, so I figured it was time for me to enter the dating scene.

Like I said in the title: I have overprotective parents. They were raised on a diet of Scripture and spirituals, and even though we live in Virginia now (not exactly Bible Belt territory), they've raised me like I'm some kind of endangered species. I wasn't allowed to have a phone until I was sixteen, and even now I can only use it during the "approved" times, which according to my mother are Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 6pm-7pm. I always figured that was normal, but apparently most people have their phone on them 24/7. Then again, a lot of things that seem normal online don't extend to real life!

Anyway, it goes without saying that mom and dad don't know about my being on Tinder. They've always said they want me to have a normal life, but when it comes to socializing, they're like that immovable object the Joker mentioned in The Dark Knight (practically half of that movie is on YouTube). I guess I have it easy compared to my sister, but it's hard to stop myself from getting restless. I've never been to a masked ball, I've never ridden across the ocean on a massive boat (never even seen a boat, much less the ocean), I've never had someone stand outside my window with a boom-box over his head. I just want to experience the things the rest of the world seems to experience. That's not unreasonable, is it?

I've spent way too long typing this. My hour is almost up. I'll save this text in my notes and keep going tomorrow!

Okay, I'm back. My parents think I use my phone to play those educational games they downloaded for me, so they don't watch me too closely. I'm sitting in the living room now while my mom cooks dinner. I could just go to my room, but there's not much point since it doesn't have a door.

Let's get back to the whole point of this post: Dating advice! You can probably tell that I'm sheltered and more than a little inexperienced. This might sound a little strange, but I've never even left my house! My parents have always told me that they don't want me exposed to the germs out there until I'm "ready," which isn't very specific. They told my sister (older than me by two years) the same thing, but she snuck out every Saturday night anyway. She always asked me to come with her, but I figured the consequences of getting caught wouldn't be worth it. I was right.

The reason I'm making this post now is because of Tinder. In the month since I downloaded it, I've only swiped right on three guys. The first one was an accident, the second one didn't swipe right on me, and the third one I've been chatting with for the last two weeks. He's eighteen, too, and his parents are pretty strict as well (but not as strict as mine, since he's allowed to cut his hair and hang out with other people). He lives within ten miles of me, though he's not really sure where I live (not surprising; we're in the middle of the woods and don't have a real address). He's incredibly nice and funny, and I think he looks exactly like a younger version of the guy from The Notebook, another movie I saw parts of on YouTube.

The only problem is, he keeps asking to meet up. I want to meet with him, too, obviously, but I can't really imagine sneaking out. That's the kind of thing my sister did, and our parents caught her, just a week after she turned nineteen. They were waiting beneath the window when she dropped out one Saturday night. I was in my room, buried under the covers, and I could still hear her yelling. She shouted my name a few times, but I couldn't tell if it was out of anger or out of something else.

My parents showed her to me on the day I turned eighteen, as a reminder to always stay their good little girl. They said they weren't really worried about me, though. They knew how close I was to my sister, which is why they were so proud that I had told them about her sneaking out. But they wanted to remind me anyways, just in case becoming an adult had given me any "ideas."

I'm not going to lie: When I first got on Tinder, I thought it would be like in Romeo and Juliet. I would climb out the window and have a romantic rendezvous somewhere in town, then slide back into bed before dawn. Now that it's actually happening, I'm too nervous to go through with it. Has anyone else ever been in this position? Have you ever wanted something so badly, but once it's within arm's reach you can't bring yourself to grab it?

I took way too long typing this out. My hour is up again, so I'll have to finish it up next week, on Tuesday. I don't even know why I'm putting so much time into this. I guess it's just a nice thought, that I'm writing something others will actually see. That I'll be communicating with people outside of this house.

It's Tuesday! Looks like this post will be both an OP and an update all in one, since a couple important things happened over the last four days. The first thing is that Toby, the guy I've been chatting with on Tinder, has told me that he'll be at a place called Pizza Hut at 1:30pm this Wednesday (so, tomorrow), and that he really hopes I can meet him there. I almost told him no. I actually typed out the word and came so close to sending it... But then I decided to sleep on the decision. He told me this just before my hour was up on Thursday, so I had plenty of time to think it over. My parents were both busy on Saturday - dad working in the backyard, mom quarantined in the laundry room - so I did something I swear I've never even thought of doing before: I snuck down to the basement, and I talked to my sister.

The door wasn't locked. I almost expected it to be, though there wouldn't be much point to that, considering how little movement the chains allow her. I've never had a problem with the dark; even that Ryan Reynolds movie Buried didn't scare me. So I didn't mind that the only light down there came from the single bulb dangling from the ceiling, one that I couldn't even turn on until I was halfway down the stairs. That's as far as my parents had taken me on my birthday, just halfway down, not a step farther. The basement is small enough (it's barely a five by five square) that I could see the entire thing in the glow of that bulb. The dusty cement floor, the damp brick walls, creaking wooden ceiling... I've never understood how rats can live down here. I asked my dad that once, and he grumbled that my sister was probably feeding them. I assumed she did it out of kindness, then later realized it might have been pragmatism - the more rats there were, the more she could eat. I had seen the meals my parents would bring her, and couldn't imagine a single person subsisting on them and nothing else.

I know you're probably bored with all these details, so I'll stop there. The important thing for you to know is that my sister made up my mind: I'm sneaking out to meet with Toby. She told me what the city is like, based on her memories from when she would spend every Saturday night there. She said she wanted me to have that, to have exactly what she'd had. I reminded her that she had been caught. She hadn't really replied to that, just gave me a strange thin smile and said that she was getting tired and could I please remind mom to bring her dinner tonight.

The only thing for me to do now is to wait. I'll post this, hopefully get some good advice (What do people even talk about on dates? The movies never show that), and then post an update tomorrow evening. Sorry if this comes out as a wall of text or something. Like I said, I'm still working out all the kinks of reddit and its system.

Honestly, I don't even care if Toby and I talk about the pattern of the wallpaper for two straight hours. I'll just be glad to have something interesting in my life for once.

Part 2

Well.

I'm back.

My original post is here, if anyone wants to read it. I realized pretty quickly after posting that /r/nosleep is about the farthest thing from /r/relationships, but luckily you all took it in stride and offered me more than enough advice. I figured I might as well post my update here as well, to let everyone know that I'm okay (or rather, alive). Mods, you can remove this if it doesn't fit the subreddit.

Apologies for any typos. This is my first time using an actual keyboard, rather than my phone's touchscreen, and I'm doing it all left-handed.

My meet up with Toby was set for 1:30, but I didn't want to run off without at least checking to see what responses my post had gotten. While my dad read in his study and my mom did her usual "don't bother me during laundry time" routine, I snuck into my parents bedroom and retrieved my phone from the bedside table. When I was younger, they would hide it from me, probably somewhere in the wardrobe, but at this point they trusted me enough to leave it out in the open. Even if one of them walked in at that very moment, I could have played it off as though I were so excited about finishing my latest round of QuizUp, I just couldn't wait for 6pm.

My parents loved that about me, they said; my mom called it my "thirst for knowledge." I remember pouring through the books and periodicals in my dad's study, absorbing everything I possibly could and regurgitating it over the dinner table that same night. "Did you know that Alexander the Great turned an island into a peninsula? Did you know that the dot-com bubble climaxed in 2000? Did you know that the oldest person in the world was 122 years old?"

I read that last one just two weeks ago, actually. It's funny how much things have changed since then. It's funny how much things have changed in just the past two days.

Of all the comments you guys left, the most common ones had to do with my sister. Everyone seemed convinced that she was going to tell my parents about my plans, and that if I tried sneaking out they would be waiting for me, just like they had been waiting for her. Well, I know the old quote about only fools asking for advice and refusing to take it. So I took it. I stayed home on Wednesday, just going about my normal routine of reading and sleeping and brushing my hair (I think the split ends are beginning to develop split ends). 1:30 came and went, and I imagine Toby did as well.

Around 5:00, my dad came into my room, phone in hand. He joined me on the bed and set the phone down between us, saying that I had earned an extra hour that day. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders to give me a friendly squeeze. "You were always our good little girl, you know. Always." He was looking at the mirror on the wall above my desk, his eyes on the small crack in the corner that commemorated the time my sister had suggested a book-throwing contest. "We raised you the same way we raised your sister, and look at how she turned out. A hedonistic, vindictive liar." He spit the last few words out, then forced a smile onto his face as he shrugged. "Some people are born bad. It all comes down to who the devil chooses. You have no idea how lucky you are that he didn't choose you."

He gave me a light kiss on the forehead and stood to go. I didn't plan on replying. But I looked down at my phone, remembered everything you all had said about how "disturbing" my life apparently was,

and blurted out, “Are we normal?”

My dad turned around slowly. He asked me what I meant by that. His expression had been so warm just a minute before, but now there was a strange coldness to it, as though he had just thrown up a wall. I picked up my phone, already regretting having asked, and told him that I hadn’t meant anything by it, and not to worry, and never mind.

The wall crumbled, giving way to a look of blazing fury that I had never seen before. He jumped forward and snatched the phone from my hand, demanding to know who had said we were anything other than normal. His hands were shaking. He shouted my mom’s name, already navigating the phone’s interface - something he had only done once before, to download the educational apps the first day he purchased it - with trembling white fingers. He shouted for her again, and the sound of his voice breaking echoed in my ears. I could have snatched the phone back from him, if I had really tried. I could have made some sort of excuse, or started crying in hopes of gaining his sympathy. But at that moment, strangely enough, all I could do was sit on my bed and think, dumbly, I won’t live to be 122 years old.

My hand is cramping, and the grey-suited man (the nice one) is back, probably to ask me yet again if there’s anything I need, anything at all. I’ll come back to this later.

He said he would bring me a “happy meal,” which sounds sinister, to be honest, as though he plans on forcing happiness down my throat until I smile for the cameras. Hopefully he won’t be back for a while. But better him than the mean one, I guess. The mean one talks about me as though I’m not there, and the last time he stopped by I heard him mutter on the way out something about cutting my hair.

I stayed in my room while my parents argued. Every other word seemed to be either “Tinder” or “normal,” with a few “our good little girl”s thrown in for emphasis. My mom starting crying after ten minutes of it, and I heard her whimper, “But what did she say?”

My dad’s reply, in a gruff, slightly abashed tone: “I didn’t ask her.”

The house was quiet after that, quiet until the sun went down. I lay on my bed on top of the covers, waiting for the telltale creak of footsteps down the hall. They came shortly before midnight, but stopped before I could sit up to greet them.

“She’s asleep,” I heard my mom say. “We can talk to her in the morning.” Three heavy footsteps followed this declaration, footsteps that seemed to be aimed for my bed. They came to a sudden stop when my mom hissed, “Please, don’t wake her! She’ll be scared, more than she already is. We can’t have her thinking there’s anything more to this. We need to treat it like it’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.”

“She doesn’t know that. She’s naive. You saw the conversations she was having with that boy. It looks like all she wanted was a normal experience.”

“Normal girls don’t run off to meet with boys.” My dad’s voice had all the ironness of a judge’s when passing a sentence. “Whores run off to meet with boys. What she planned on doing was not normal.”

“What she planned on doing isn’t what she did,” my mom insisted. “We both watched her all day. She didn’t even glance out the window. She resisted temptation, like Christ in the desert. If anything, this proves her purity.”

A heavy silence ensued. I realized that I had been holding my breath since my dad’s condemnation,

and let it out slowly, afraid to even move my stomach. I pretended I was a corpse at a wake. I pretended I was a mummy in a sarcophagus. I pretended I was a murder victim resting comfortably within a chalk outline.

When my dad spoke at last, it was in a low growl. “The other one.” I couldn’t hear his fists clenching, but saw them in my mind’s eye. “That’s enough. We’ve had enough.”

“I know,” my mom whispered.

“We’ve been kind to her, these past two years. We’ve fed her more than she deserved, we’ve shown her our love after she spat on us, we have treated her like a human being instead of the ghoul she is. And she thought she could win us back by trying to drag her sister, her own flesh and blood, down to her level. As though the Lord would give Lucifer his blessing again. As though Cain were an honorable man for betraying his brother.”

“I know.”

“Family is family.”

“I know.”

He and my mom reverted back to silence, this time for so long that I nearly moved, assuming that they had somehow slipped away. Then: “I’ll take care of it.” My dad, in a voice that could bring down snow in the summer. His heavy footsteps returned. They retreated away from my bed and were interrupted once again by my mom’s voice.

“No,” she said, more calm than I had ever heard her. “I will.”

The nice grey-suited man is back, a bag in his hand. I can smell its contents, and my stomach grumbles.

He’s gone to get me a knife, after I broke the plastic one in half when I tried smearing the ketchup over the burger (nothing too revolutionary about this meal; I’ve had burgers and fries almost every week of my whole life). I told him I didn’t need another knife, but he insisted. I can hear him on the other side of the door right now, murmuring to someone (one of the doctors, I think, the one with shoulder-length blonde hair) about the poor girl who had never had McDonald’s before.

I don’t want to keep typing. My hand aches, even more than the one in the cast, and my head is beginning to pound. But they need me to write down what happened. Normally, they say, things like this are handwritten on special forms. They allowed me the computer only because my right hand is incapacitated, and because I refused to do a dictation.

I don’t want to talk about what happened. Putting it into words is already hard enough without someone else listening.

I watched my dad the morning after the argument, peering at him from my vantage point behind the bedroom window. He was in the garden, digging in between the tomatoes and the roses. The hole was too big for a new flower or fruit, yet too deep for a tree or bush. He dug throughout the morning, not pausing even when the blisters burst and drenched his fingers in blood. Once he had a sizable space cleared, he tossed the shovel to the side and returned to the house. He emerged a few minutes later dragging behind himself a garbage bag, big and black, which he emptied into the hole. His back was to me, bent over his task, obscuring the bag’s contents from my view. The hole was too deep for me to see the bottom. He filled it, quickly, his movements mechanical.

When I walked into the kitchen, my mom was at the sink. She glanced up at me, smiling gently, and immediately launched into a delicate apology for what had happened the previous day. She explained that my dad was a very sensitive man, and that he had only been looking out for my safety, and that both she and he understood that I hadn't meant any harm by my actions. They weren't angry with me, she promised. On the contrary, they were proud, so proud of their good little girl, and they loved me very much, and they didn't want me to worry about this little event in the least bit.

I could barely hear her. Even now, thinking as hard as I can, I remember only bits and pieces of what she said, just the general gist of it. I was watching her hands as they wiped a cleaver clean, washing the blood from its blade and down the drain.

A few of you were horrified by the image of my sister chained in the basement. Do you know something even more terrifying than that? Do you know what's worse than opening the basement door, turning on the bulb, and finding a half-starved girl slumped against the wall?

Opening the basement door, turning on the bulb, and finding nothing. Nothing but a dark puddle in the middle of the floor, obscured almost completely by the dozens of rats attempting to lap it up.

I heard my mom yelling for me to stop as I ran out of the house. Somewhere in the back of my mind, it registered that this was my first time being outside, the first time the grass could tickle my bare feet and the birds could scatter out of my way as I ran towards them. I didn't pause to dwell on this; I was fixated on my dad, who had just straightened up from the half-filled hole. I saw the surprise on his face as I swung my fist in the direction of his cheek.

It hurt.

A lot.

I screamed and curled over, my knees buckling as my knuckles erupted in a pain that splintered across my entire hand, the way a crack appears on a mirror. I fell onto the loose dirt, my face pressed into the earth, my howl muffled. My dad did nothing, said nothing, just stepped away from me cautiously as though I were a rabid animal. I heard the door slam as my mom left the house, calling my name.

Leaving my right hand balled against my stomach, I plunged the left one into the dirt, hardly processing what I was doing. I scooped out handful after handful, the eyes of my parents beating on my back, until I felt something brush against my skin. Something clammy and stiff. I wrapped my fingers around it and pulled, releasing it once I had brought it to the surface.

A human hand flopped onto the ground, its stump the deep scarlet of dried blood.

The man is back. He sets the knife on the table - a real knife this time - and smiles at me. He tells me how much they appreciate my help. He says if my account is good enough, I might not be called in to testify once the trial eventually starts, probably months from now. His phone vibrates before I can respond, and he leaves the room with it pressed to his ear.

I don't know how much more I should bother saying. Everyone knows what happened next, more or less. They know that I was found wandering through woods by a hunter who claims to have at first mistaken me for some sort of bear. They know that he carried me back to his pickup truck and started driving towards the hospital. They know that he swerved in shock when I numbly uncrossed my arms, reached out, and deposited the severed hand onto his dashboard. He crashed into a pole, and an ambulance drove us the rest of the way.

The police found my parents at home going about their lives as though nothing had gone awry. My

mom was doing laundry, and my dad was thumbing through a novel. Even when the officers opened the basement door, even when they went into the backyard and saw raccoons going through the freshly dug grave, my parents remained unfazed. The most they protested was at riding in the police car instead of taking the environmentally friendly action and walking.

I don't know where they are now. In a cell somewhere, though probably not in chains. The last time I saw them was the day I left: their blank faces, watching me backing away from them and into the woods, not even bothering to protest. It was as though they were afraid of me, had given up on me, were in shock at me.

I wonder how much they know about my current situation. I heard it being discussed on the local news as I left the hospital. "Feral child found frantic after fleeing freak parents," the announcer boomed. I'm a feral child because of my hair, the man in the grey suit (the mean one) explained, even though I'm neither feral nor a child. I'll have to cut it, he said.

The knife that the nice man brought is sitting untouched, glinting in the sunlight. The window is bigger than any of the windows at my house, even though this is just a police station. I never realized how small my house actually was. I never realized how small my world actually was, or how quiet it was. I never realized that movies lie about happy endings.

My hand hurts. My head hurts too, not in a way I can really explain. I know I should eat, should pick up the knife and spread the ketchup across my burger. But the effort seems monumental. I won't live to be 122 years old. I don't want to.

I'm going to post this story for all of you. I'm going to proofread it and make sure it covers all the details the policemen asked for. I'm going to pick up the knife.

On the other side of the door, I can hear the nice man talking. He's saying that he still can't believe it, that something like this could happen, and in such a nice small town, too. He's wondering how many other basements there are with chains on the wall. He's wondering how many people there are like me.

My Life Was Ruined Because of an Email I Should Never Have Recieved

by stillrunning__

Second Runner Up - August Monthly Contest

Part 1

Before I get into this, I need to make something clear.

This isn't happening right now. I'm not going to beg for advice or help, because I'm beyond any of your help. I've had to give up everything in my life that ever mattered. This happened more than 9 years ago, and I'm finally taking the risk to share it. World events are seriously scaring me, and I have more…personal reasons that I can get into later.

To post this, I've driven around town for forty minutes before I found an unsecured internet connection. I'm not risking posting this from my own. I made a throwaway account, which has no ties to anything related to my life.

I'm well and truly fucked, and it's all because of an email that I should never have received.

In the summer of 2005 I thought I had everything I ever needed from life. I had just finished grad school and begun teaching English at a local community college, had married the love of my life that January in an awesome and geeky ceremony, we had moved into a fix-it-up bungalow on three acres of land, and we had just rescued an Elkhound puppy from a local shelter. Life was good.

Looking back, I wish I had enjoyed those days more.

My wife (I'll call her Fay, not her real name) and I had just finished working outside one night in July, and we were relaxing with a beer on the porch. Fireflies were doing their little "I glow, you glow, we all fuck like rabbits" dance, and our puppy was gnawing on a pair of my socks I had tied into a knot for him. I asked Fay if she would mind if I checked my email before we went to bed; I was expecting a notification about the classes I was going to teach in the fall, and was looking forward to actually using my degree.

Fay went up to bed, and I logged into my work email account. There wasn't an email from my department chair, but there was a new email entitled "Progress of EBOV-7x." I figured it was spam, but I impulsively clicked on it anyway.

The email's intended address was literally two letters off from mine, and it came with an attachment named "E-7x results and suggestions." It was addressed to a man named Mark, and it read as follows:

"Mark,

Attached are the prelim results from the last batch of tests on EBOV-7. The x-generation seems to be holding up much better to the modifications. Remember this is EYES ONLY, so don't print this out or anything. You're new here, and we all think your help is really what's gotten us off the ground on this. If you have anything to add, let me know ASAP.

Provided this gen holds up, we'll have a much better quarterly report for the bigwigs than we did last time. Don't wear the tie with the mustard stain on it, OK?

Reagan"

I had no clue who either of these people were, and I didn't recognize domain name of the email address. The only part I could make out was "Detrick." Just as I finished reading it, Fay called and asked if I was ready to head to bed. I told her I would only be a minute, the cursor hovering over the download link for the PDF file. Every reasonable part of me said to just delete the email, to pretend I never saw it…but, as you can probably tell, I was youthful and impulsive. I clicked the download link, and after a few seconds, the downloaded file popped up in my downloads. I opened it, fully expecting it to be password locked – I mean, from the tone of the email, wouldn't you?

It wasn't. Fuck, I wish it had been.

After it opened, I was bombarded with sentences so thick with scientific lingo that I had difficulty even parsing them out. I was a Liberal Arts major, for fuck's sake. There was one diagram I recognized, though, from having a friend in undergrad who majored in epidemiology.

It looked like this: http://i.imgur.com/DLcrT80.jpg.

For those of you who don't know, that's Ebola.

I skimmed down, until I finally found a paragraph that summarized what I had been struggling to read:

"With the iteration of EBOV-7x and the hiring of new personnel, we believe we have finally addressed the main desires of the client. EBOV-7x contains the following alterations from the base EBOV-0:

A) Increased incubation time of 12 to 40 days as opposed to EBOV-0 incubation of 2 to 12 days.

B) Suppressed the lack-of-appetite common in EBOV-0, thus removing one of the major diagnosable tools.

C) Increased durability of the virus, allowing it to remain hot for up to 8 hours outside the human body (See Test 100BA for applicable data).

D) Decreased rate of fever increase by 20%, allowing for upwards of 35% more time before patient becomes immobilized."

I pushed my chair away from the computer and simply stared for a minute. I rubbed my eyes, and reread the paragraph over and over again. I couldn't believe what I was reading – what would be the point to this? Who would want these changes to an already deadly virus?

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to relax. I wasn't an expert on anything related to Ebola, but one of my strengths had always been an ability to think outside the box and move past my own internal assumptions. I asked myself, what purpose would these changes have? What would be the goal behind it?

As I asked myself that, the answer came to me quickly. It wasn't about making a vaccine, or wanting to remove the danger from the virus.

Someone was altering Ebola to make it less noticeable, to make it less easily diagnosable.

Someone was making a version of Ebola that wouldn't burn itself out.

A version of Ebola that COULD be a pandemic.

Holy Shit.

Holy.

Fucking.

Shit.

On pure autopilot, I copied the file onto a USB stick and put it in my messenger bag I used for work. I marked the email as unread and deleted it, then went upstairs to bed. As Fay snored beside me and the puppy curled himself into the crook of my neck, sleep did not find me. I had no clue what to do. Should I go to the police? The news? Should I just forget it ever happened?

Eventually I fell asleep, and got up the next morning. I debated telling Fay about the email – I had never kept anything from her for the four years we had dated – but I decided against it. For all I knew it was nothing, and there was no reason to worry her.

I drove to work, and tried to forget about it. I worked on getting my office situated to my liking, and was about to call Fay to meet me for lunch when two men in dark suits knocked on the open door.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Dr. George?" they asked. (No, that's not my real name. You won't find my real name.)

"Yes?" I repeated.

"This is Mr. Rein, and I'm Mr. Frol," one of them said. If you asked me now, I wouldn't be able to tell you which was which. They were both middle aged white men, brown hair, clean shaven, and wearing dark sunglasses. "You may have received an email from our company server by mistake last night. Did you?"

OK, I'm gonna have to cut it off here. The family whose WIFI I'm ripping off have looked out the window four times at my car, and now someone has a phone in their hand. I'll have to be more careful next time. I'll be back as soon as I can. Stay safe.

Part 2

OK, back everybody. I'm being a bit more careful this time; I'm still hijacking this family's WiFi to post this and browse reddit a little, but I'm here in the middle of the day now. The only one home (from what I can see) is the wife/mom, and she hasn't noticed me yet.

Some of you are probably wondering why I even bother to drive 40 minutes to do this – I'm not comfortable even writing this out on my home network, let alone posting it from there.

I've lived in 60 different cities since this happened, and I like where I am now. I really don't want to have to move again.

Anyway, when I had to cut out last time, I had just been approached by two men in suits.

At that moment, I had never been so appreciative of my grandparents teaching me to play poker. I frowned and looked upward to the left, acting like I was trying to remember. (In case you're wondering, the idea that looking up & to the left suggests telling the truth while the opposite suggests lying is a myth. Doesn't stop people from believing it, though.)

I told them I had gotten it, but that I had marked it as spam and deleted it.

"Would you mind showing us?" one of them asked. He smiled and took his sunglasses off, probably in an attempt to appear more cordial. The second kept his glasses on, which made it impossible to see where he was looking. "If we don't ask, our bosses are guaranteed to give us hell for it," No-Sunglasses said.

I agreed, and logged on to my university email. I pulled up the trash folder, and showed them the (apparently) unread email. "We really do apologize for this," the first man said. "We've been installing new internal servers and we've been having trouble with stored addresses and queuing emails. The new system is meant to automatically find the correct email address, but it's been attaching wrong domain names to IDs that are close."

They watched as I deleted it totally, and seemed content. Each of them shook my hand, reminded me that the email was under corporate nondisclosure, and walked out. As soon as they were gone, I shut the door and collapsed into the chair at the computer.

What kind of company was this? How in the world did they find me, find where I worked, and send people in less than 24 hours? I looked at the USB stick in my bag, but didn't touch it. In some weird way I worried I had damned myself with it, but I couldn't shake the feeling that it would end up being more important than not.

I finished up my workday, and headed home. The next day was Saturday, and we needed to mow. While some of you might think "Why would mowing take a whole day?" I can only respond by saying that one of the downsides of having land is taking care of it. We had two tractors so that Fay and I could mow at the same time and finish in as little time as required.

Before I explain what happened that Saturday, you need to understand something: without fail, I serviced those tractors every time after we used them. I cleaned the mower decks, sharpened the blades when they needed it, and double checked the engine. I checked oil and gas before AND after using them.

Yes, I'm a little OCD. It's been of more help than harm.

Fay and I each typically used the same tractor, but she had told me that her tractor had felt like it was

pulling to the left instead of going straight ahead. I told her to use mine, and that I would check it out. She started the tractor, and began to mow our field. The tractor worked fine for about 15 minutes, then the engine began to splutter and cough. I noticed it, and waved for Fay to stop. She did, shutting the tractor off and starting to walk towards me.

Several things happened all at once.

I stood up, walking to meet my wife halfway.

Fay walked towards me smiling.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a dark maroon sedan slow down as it drove past our house.

The tractor exploded behind my wife into a fireball. Pieces of metal and rubber flew in every direction, and the shockwave knocked Fay forward onto the ground.

The blast of heat hit me full in the face, and felt like I had dropped face-first into a bonfire.

I ran to her, scared shitless. She was fine, though the wind had been knocked out of her. I moved her to the garage, told her to call 911, and ran back to the burning husk of my tractor with a fire extinguisher. I used the entire extinguisher, but I couldn't get the blaze to totally stop.

The next few hours were a blur. The fire department showed up, followed by police. The neighbors gawked from their front porches, and we were asked the same questions again and again. The cops asked if either of us had any reason to suspect foul play – God help me, I should have mentioned the meeting with the two men at work and the email, but I kept my mouth shut. What would I have said, anyway?

"Well gee Officer, I received an email last night from a company making a biological weapon out of Ebola and today two men in dark suits showed up at work to ask me about it in a vaguely threatening manner?"

I would have laughed at that myself, had someone else said it.

By the time everyone had left, we were exhausted and starving. We loaded up the puppy into my car and went to Fay's parents' place, where her dad cooked on the grill and I got lectured on the importance of taking care of my tools.

Thing is, I did. Still do. There was NO reason for that tractor to explode.

After dinner, we went back to our home. There was a huge circle of blackened dirt and burnt grass in the field where the tractor had exploded, but otherwise there was no sign of the circus that had filled our lives only a few hours earlier. Fay was exhausted, and she went straight to bed.

I couldn't sleep. I kept running over every check to the tractor that I had done, trying to see where I could have gone wrong. The fuel lines weren't loose, no matter what my father-in-law insinuated. There had been NO reason for it to explode.

Now properly feeling my paranoia, I needed to double-check the other major property that I gave my OCD an outlet on: the guns.

Yes, I owned guns. I grew up around them, and they're only tools. Treat it with the proper respect, and there's nothing inherently wrong with them.

We had a shotgun in the living room, on top of the television stand. There was a handgun in the kitchen, a holster screwed into the bottom of the cupboards behind the fluorescent light for the

counter, and a revolver my wife kept on her nightstand. Lastly, I kept a Mare's Leg in the basement, hidden in the pantry behind rows of mason jars filled with pears and peaches.

I cleaned these every Sunday, disassembling them and making sure they were in order. As I walked through the house checking each gun, the firing pins were missing.

Let me repeat that – the firing pins, from the guns I cleaned every Sunday like clockwork, were missing.

The only gun that hadn't been tampered with was the Mare's Leg downstairs; the lines of dust hadn't even been disrupted, and the gun was still able to fire without complications.

I went back upstairs and sat in the living room, trying to let my wife rest while I had a panicked breakdown. In the span of less than 24 hours, I had learned a company was apparently making a biological Ebola weapon, been confronted by men in suits who claimed to represent said company, had one of my tractors explode nearly killing my wife, and had come home to find someone had tampered with my belongings in an attempt to make me unable to defend myself.

What the fuck was going on here?

My first concern was for Fay: was someone targeting both of us? Just her? How would I be able to protect her?

I thought back over the day, and remembered the maroon sedan that had been driving past when the tractor exploded. There was nothing noteworthy about it, but an instinct told me to watch for it again. I added "gun shop" to the errand list on the fridge and went to sleep, resolving to keep an eye out for the sedan.

It didn't help.

Over the next weeks, I recognized a pattern of three distinct cars following my wife and I around town. There was a black Honda, the maroon sedan, and a dark blue motorcycle. When I would take the puppy outside, one would inevitably drive down the road while I was outside. When we would go to the movies, one would be parked within five spaces of our car. I even started to notice them at family gatherings, driving past when one of my cousin's had a birthday party or when we visited Fay's grandmother at the nursing home.

At the same time, more accidents began to occur around our home.

The heat would miraculously go out, only for a repairman to say that we lucked out "because if I hadn't come when I did, you'd have a pretty serious buildup of carbon monoxide here."

The springs on the garage doors suddenly began failing, almost crushing the puppy when I was working outside.

The power brakes went out in my car, forcing me to cruise down the breakdown lane on the highway until I eased to a stop and put the emergency brake on.

Did they know, somehow, that I had downloaded that information and kept it? Were these really accidents, or attempts on my life?

After three weeks of this, I got out of bed in the middle of the night and checked the guns again. No missing pieces, and I sat in the dark to think. Deleting the information wouldn't help; if they knew I had it, they wouldn't know I deleted it. If push came to shove, it was the only leverage I had.

The email had come to me by mistake, so it wouldn't be logical to assume Fay had read it. She had

been on the tractor I usually used when it exploded – it was clear to me that I had been meant to be on it, not her.

The “accidents” had only started around the house since the visit by the two men, Rein and Frol. I hadn’t seen them again in person, but the trio of vehicles were ever-present.

A real part of me wanted to take my guns and go hunting, but this wasn’t the Wild West. I wasn’t going to risk someone getting shot in crossfire, and I wasn’t sure if the police would accept my story. If this company had the capacity to find me in less than twenty-four hours, how could I be sure they wouldn’t fabricate evidence against me?

Should I tell Fay about all of this? She was my wife, my partner; I knew she’d be in my corner one hundred percent, but I couldn’t risk her safety. Looking back, I know this sounds chauvinist. I'm not -- Fay was more talented than I was in a lot of areas -- but I was raised to believe that a man protects his family, no matter what.

Discounting the problems with the ventilation systems, everything that had happened was directed at me. If I told her, she’d become as legitimate a target as I apparently was.

As long as these people kept trying to….proactively silence a leak, I suppose would be their way of saying it, my wife was in danger of being collateral damage. Her remaining that way was not an option, and I had to think of a way to ensure her safety permanently.

I was out of options, at least the ones that left me in a position I wanted to be in – namely with my wife, safe, in the life we had built.

The only option I had left that would keep me alive and keep my wife and family safe was one I didn’t want to do: I had to disappear. Vanish, out of the clear blue sky, and make it as close to impossible as I could to follow me. Once I was off the grid, I could find a way to either expose the company or make some kind of deal with them.

I couldn’t expect Fay to follow me, nor would I want to expose her to that level of danger. I would have to abandon the love of my life, every accomplishment I had earned, in order to survive this – at least temporarily.

I was so fucked.

Part 3

Back again – I'm not sure if it's just because I miss everything that made life familiar, but this family has really made me smile. Just knowing normal life continues, you know?

I doubt anyone is monitoring r/nosleep, and having some human interaction where I can be honest is refreshing. I never thought anybody would honestly care, so thank you to everyone who has commented.

I said I've lived in 60 cities, which sounds like a lot. Some were as short as a week, others were a few months…but once you start moving, it's hard to stop.

When you decide to disappear, it isn't nearly as easy as it sounds. Everyone tends to assume that it's easy to drop off the grid totally, to just walk away from the life you've lived up to that point and choose a new path.

It isn't…at least, not if you don't want to eventually be found again. It isn't as simple as "take the money out of the bank, stop going to work, go to new town." To give myself a head start, and to make sure it was clear that Fay wasn't involved, I had to do the legwork to provide misinformation to the people chasing me.

I'm not going to go into a whole breakdown of how I managed to vanish. If you really want to plan it for yourself, there are plenty of materials available. I'm just going to give an overview, to make it clear how I approached the whole thing.

First, I gave business cards and cash to friends who worked overseas. I told them they would be doing me a huge favor, and nobody suspected anything (or if they did, they never voiced their concerns). One went to China, another to Western Europe. Every time they left a card, it was a marker that someone would have to investigate at a cursory level, at least, which would buy time.

Two of our friends had just gotten married, and had went to South America on their honeymoon. When we went to their home for a dinner party, I excused myself and quickly photoshopped tiny photos of my face into the mulling crowds behind the couple's smiling selfies. When the photos were posted on facebook, any kind of facial recognition would (hopefully) find me in the background and again demand some level of investigation.

Lastly, I randomly picked four towns off a map. I bought a prepaid cellphone and, when I should have been working, I looked up apartments for rent in those locations. I called and made appointments to look – appointments I never intended to keep. I called water services, cable and internet providers, magazine companies – all to set up subscriptions or knowingly false installation dates.

For the people reading this who recoil and think to themselves, "What a jackass," you can bottle your displeasure. When a company like that comes to a place to make an installation and there isn't anyone there, they simply don't do the installation. It's no skin off their nose.

For the callback numbers on all those appointments, I made sure to give the number to the nearest police or federal authority station. I doubted the people who sent the email would be worried, but I fully intended to make it clear that I was meeting them step for step.

For every sales plan or rewards program I belonged to, I called and changed my information slightly. I purposefully misspelled my name, or had them "fix" my address to one of the four towns I had picked or to a PO box I had prepaid just for this. Everything was done with one reason: to make it as

time consuming as possible to hunt down every lead I could place, in order to give me time to find a way out of this mess.

To make sure I didn't lose the information I had saved on the USB drive from the email, I printed everything out from it twice and sent each set of copies to a different PO box owned by private companies.

Again, this isn't a how-to, but this is an easy way to break it down:

BOX A (fake everything) – town I never planned on visiting

BOX B (Fake everything) – town I never planned on visiting

BOX C (real, sent one copy here) – town adjacent to a place I was familiar with

BOX D (real, sent one copy here) -- town where I planned on disappearing to, to start with

The whole time, I had to keep Fay in the dark. It killed me to see her smiling, or playing with the dog, or to hear her murmur "I love you" as she fell asleep next to me. If I had been able, I would have rewound until just before I had opened that damn email and continued to sit with her for as long as I was able. I managed to keep my misinformation-building efforts away from her, but the "accidents" kept happening.

Our oven broke, and the heating element didn't stop getting hotter. I had to shut the power off for the whole house in order to avert a fire.

On my way to work, the stoplight glitched just as it turned green for me, staying green for the opposing lanes as well. I almost got T-boned by an old man driving a mid-life-crisis-mobile, and had to grip the steering wheel extra tight to keep from yelling.

One afternoon, Fay took Sigmund (we had finally named our little rescue) out for a walk in the backyard. I heard her scream, and ran outside with the shotgun; I didn't know what to expect, but I knew I wasn't going to go down without making a fight of it. She was holding the puppy and shaking, and pointed out to the field.

Even from that distance, I could make out the timber rattler moving through the grass. She told me the puppy had noticed it before she did, and she had barely had time to yank back on the leash and move away before the snake had coiled up onto itself and began rattling. I walked out, aimed, and suddenly there was cooling snake blood all over a five foot circle.

Fay was shaken, and asked me if I had ever seen one before. I answered her no, and while we were technically in the range for one, I had never seen a snake like that in a populated area like where we lived.

These "accidents" were getting more and more desperate. I have no doubt that if they had simply wanted me dead, they could have shot me. From my own perspective, it seemed apparent that the desired outcome was to silence me permanently without any foul play being suspected AT ALL. I didn't have any time left.

I disappeared on an early Tuesday morning. I had seen a lawyer previously, and drawn up divorce papers. I gave Fay everything short of a few hundred dollars. I didn't want to divorce her, but I had to keep propping up the fact that she didn't know anything about E-7x or plans to weaponize Ebola.

I kissed her on the cheek as she slept, and quietly got dressed. I had slowly been packing for a few days – a bar of soap here, a shirt there – and was ready to go without more packing. As I got up,

Sigmund yawned and looked up at me, his tail wagging. I had to bite my tongue to keep from crying as I scratched behind his ears and kissed him, trying to commit to memory his smell and the feel of Fay's skin under my hand.

I signed the divorce papers and left them on the kitchen counter. I tried to write a note, to give SOME kind of explanation…but nothing came, at least nothing that would keep her safely ignorant of what I had to leave. I ended up writing "I'm sorry, I'll always love you" and left it at that.

I left behind everything I had loved, in a last-ditch effort to keep them all safe.

It was lonely, and terrifying. I've been on the run ever since 2005.

Nine years. Nine long fucking lonely years. I never stopped moving in the first two years, staying in one place for no more than two months before packing up and moving. I worked odd jobs, always got paid under the table in cash, and lied with a smile every time someone asked where I was from or about the ring I wore around my neck.

I've tried three times, over the years, to get the evidence I have to people who might be able to help me. Two were politicians, and one was a newsperson.

I suspect you'll recognize their names: Larry Craig, Anthony Weiner, and Tim Russert.

I picked the politicians not because they were tough on bioweapons or the "vast military-industrial complex," but because they represented states far from my home state. When I reached out to Craig on August 23rd, his staff seemed remote but interested. Four days after, I turned on the radio and heard that Roll Call was reporting that he had been arrested for lewd conduct.

Holy shit.

I went underground again after that for the better part of a year, moving and always keeping an eye over my shoulder.

I reached out to Russert next, contacting his staff and explaining that I had a story that I would only trust to Russert himself. I was a fan of "Meet the Press" for a number of years, and always appreciated that he never seemed to play favorites. In the back of my mind, I daydreamed about my life turning out like something from "The Pelican Brief;" reuniting with Fay, seeing my parents again, my old employers offering my job back out of pride for my accomplishments. I heard back from them on June 10th of 2008, where his chief of staff explained that Tim would be contacting me personally to set up a meeting.

On June 13th, Russert died of an apparent heart attack.

I cleared out my meager apartment and was on the next Greyhound bus out of town the same day.

After that, I left the US for several years. It was easier to hide in more populated areas, and while my facility with other languages was never fantastic, I knew enough to pass by. I crossed back into the country in late 2010, and decided to attempt to go public again.

I contacted a junior congressman from New York this time, someone on the opposing side of the political aisle from my first attempt. I actually spoke with Weiner myself, and he offered me protection and his full support in exchange for the information I had. We verbally agreed, and I even travelled to NYC to meet him.

We had agreed to meet in a nondescript corner restaurant, but he never showed.

I waited for an hour, but nothing. My off-the-grid instincts were screaming, and I vanished into a dive

bar. On the TV, I saw the story – a sex scandal, where Weiner had been having online affairs. His credibility was totally shot.

I finished my beer, and disappeared out of the city again. I've been underground ever since, and this is the first time I've used any kind of "social media" since.

We've come to my secondary reason for posting this. I know Fay got remarried. I know my mother still holds a ceremony for me every year on my birthday, and my father died without knowing what happened to his son.

I know Fay was into reddit from the start of the site, and this subreddit is exactly the kind of thing she would be into. It's remote, a one-in-a-million chance, but there's a possibility that she could read this.

Fay, if you are, please know I love you. I've never stopped loving you. I never wanted to hurt you, and everything I've done has been to keep you safe. I know you haven't sold the house yet – I lurk online using proxies and public internet access. There's a lockbox buried under the third fence post away from the road. It has the first book we ever read to each other, and a handwritten copy of my wedding vows. I had hoped to give it to you on our thirtieth wedding anniversary, but that isn't looking likely. Do what you want with it.

I love you.

Part 4

OK, I can't stay here long. I wanted to address a few things in a longer post, but events have happened that make that no longer an option. This will be my last update in a very, very long time.

When I woke up this morning, I turned on the radio and realized I fucked up.

I fucked up badly.

The family I had been skipping internet off of suffered a home invasion last night. The news is reporting that a team of four masked men stormed into their house at three in the morning. The invaders shot the family's dog, killing it instantly. They proceeded to torture the family, shooting the husband/father in the stomach and forcing the wife/mom and two kids to watch him bleed out.

By the time police were able to arrive, the invaders were gone. They murdered him, and cut off three of the eldest child's fingers. Police reports are saying the intruders are asking about a man with my description, though the family didn't know anything.

All because I stole their internet and posted this.

I'm waiting at a bus station now. I need to disappear again, though hopefully I can manage to do something for the family whose lives I managed to totally fuck up.

I've seen a lot of your comments about going to wikileaks, of "being a hero." Here's the thing – I never wanted to be a hero, and you can call me a coward if you want. All I wanted was a normal life with my wife and a dog and 2.5 kids. I need to find a way back to that, if at all possible. This isn't a video game or an action movie – I can't just walk into a building with a gun and automatically assume everyone will recognize me as "the protagonist," nor can I just walk into a newspaper or TV station and have my life be fixed.

I contacted wikileaks once, to assuage my fears after what happened with Russert. In the 24 hours it took them to contact me, there were men in the town I was in at the time already asking around about me.

This isn't worth my life, and that's that.

I haven't contacted Fay. Her new husband is old money, and she seems fine. I saw some of you suspect that he's in on this somehow, but I doubt it. I'm going to try to find a way to slip some kind of message to her, I think.

To the person who claimed to be the company and said my trip to Europe didn't do anything – if you're real, thanks for proving it did. I never went to Europe, you idiots. Facial recognition will never outpace the human element.

Lastly, to the people claiming to be companies hired by my wife to "indulge my paranoid delusions," I congratulate you on your imagination. That's it. I wish I could laugh it off as easily as you.

I don't think they would chase any of you, but watch your back for a few days just to be safe.

Goodbye, reddit. Thanks for listening, and for giving me some solid human contact.

Goodbye, Fay. Forgive me.

This is the scariest shit I've ever taken/seen... you get it once you reddit... pun intended.

by ChrisNelson93

Third Runner Up - August Monthly Contest

Part 1

http://imgur.com/TbOYCKX

Okay, so the events I'm about to share with you literally happened like last night and I'm still fucking shaking. I'm not here to tell a story. I'm here to get insight from all you guys that are in to fucked up stuff like this. I don't wanna hear "dude your writing is terrible" because I just don't fucking care at this point. I just want someone to say it'll all be alright. I want HELP. Fair warning: I say fuck a lot.

Now that we've cleared that up here's a little background on me. I'm your average hard working blue collar all American guy. I work nights in Texas but I live in Louisiana and every evening I make an hour long drive to get to my job and on this little drive I'll stop to get a red bull and a pack of camel blue shorts to help me get through the night. Always stop at the same gas station, always pay the same amount, $13.35. Hell, the old lady behind the cash register knows my name at this point. The one thing I never stop for though is to use the bathroom. this time I did.

Everything was normal I walked in nodded hello to Pam (old cash register lady) and walk to the back cooler to grab my red bull. It was at this point that the Taco Bell that I had for dinner decided to make its appearance and began to bang it's war drums against my stomach. Fuck you Taco Bell. I instantly headed towards the bathroom gripping my stomach in agony. I Needed to purge myself of this unholy entity quickly before it destroyed my favorite pair of work jeans. With Lightning quick speed I locked myself in the first stall I could reach and pulled my pants down and sat on the toilet. With a sigh of relief I began to release my bowels. Holy mother of god it felt amazing. As I sat there I began scrolling through reddit no sleep on my phone, which has become a daily ritual for me. About a minute went by and I heard the bathroom door open and someone shuffle in.

Now this would be completely normal and itself had the unidentified person not walk directly to the stall I was in and just stand there. I waited for a knock so I could give the awkward "Occupado" that I usually do when this happens. It was then that I noticed the person's feet. I could tell that it was a woman by the size and shape, and that they were wearing women's sandals. Little green ones with pink flowers painted on the thongs. but their feet were dirty as fuck. Like haven't showered in a month dirty. I just figured some drunk girl accidentally stumbled into the men's room.

"Uhhhh hello?" I said in the most casual Way one can while sitting on a toilet. After a second I started hearing whispering behind the door like she was talking to herself. I just couldn't make out what she was saying. Okay so now it was a little weird but I just wrote it off as the bitch was just some homeless crazy person. "Someone's in here." I said, slightly annoyed at whoever this was that was bothering me while I was trying to take care of business. Then I heard two knocks. Very slow and very deliberate. "Yeah. Hey. Occupied." Two more knocks. This was starting to piss me off. "Look lady-" I was cut short by a loud banging that shook the whole stall. Bang bang bang. It's like she was

hitting the door with a fucking sledge hammer. Over and over again. Bang bang bang. And she's still just whispering away, having her own little conversation as she battering rams the stall door repeatedly.

At this point I was a mix of really fucking pissed and pretty fucking freaked out. "What the fuck is your problem!?" I yelled. Kicking the door back. The banging continued but now it was accompanied by a wet smacking sound. And then she spoke. "Let us in." Her voice sounded almost childlike which just added to the creepy factor. Bang bang bang. "Let us in. Let us in." The banging and wet smacking sound got so loud I had to cover my ears. "LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE YOU CRAZY BITCH!!!" And then almost instantly she stopped.

I watched her feet as she backed away from the door and right into the bathroom wall. She slid down the wall until she sat facing my stall. I waited for five minutes for something else to happen but when nothing did I stood up, pulled up my pants, and reached hesitantly for the lock. My hands were shaking and my heart was pounding in my ears. I didn't really think about what I would do once I opened the door but if I didn't get out of there I'd never make it to work on time and I doubted the old "Some crazy woman wouldn't let me shit in peace" excuse would get me much sympathy from the boss man.

So I went for it. Very slowly I opened it. I let it swing all the way open to get a good look at this chick. I want to remember what she looks like before I book it out of there. And there she is. Sitting there staring up at me and smiling this big fucked up horror film smile. She's got blood just dripping down her face from her forehead. I pull the stall door around and see blood splatter. This crazy fuck was bashing her crazy fuck head into the fucking door until she fucking bled. I was surprised she was even still conscious. "What the hell is wrong with you lady?" Was the most intelligent question I could muster. She just stared. She must've been on drugs or something.

I felt bad for her. I inched my way to the sink to grab paper towels to help her stop the bleeding of her nose and forehead. Her head never turned but her eyes followed me the whole time and that creepy fucking smile never left her lips. I grabbed the towels and squatted down so I was eye level with her. My face and hers were about two feet apart as I dabbed at her forehead with a paper towel. She was actually pretty cute if you could get over the bloody, creepy smiling and wide eyed stare. Maybe 22 years old, black hair, and petite. But then I noticed her eyes. Like REALLY noticed them. She was staring right at me but it's like she wasn't even there. Like she was empty. It made me shiver a bit.

I continued trying to clean her up and finally she spoke again with the same little kid voice. "Why didn't you let us in?" At this point she couldn't really startle me anymore so I non-chalantely said "Well I wasn't expecting company so I didn't have time to clean the place up." In the most sarcastic way I could. Nothing. Not even a giggle. She just kept up the creepy possessed act.

I was just about done helping her and going to stand when she said "Will you let us in now?" And before I could reply I see movement to my left and I jump up just in time as a box cutter blade slashes through the air and instead of hitting my throat makes contact with my wrist. I start spurting blood instantly. I'm standing there holding my wrist and gritting my teeth and she's still just sitting there. Only now she's holding up this box cutter, smiling at me like she did me a favor.

"WHAT THE FUCK!?" I screamed, as I tried to stop the bleeding. But I instantaneously forgot about any damage I'd taken after what happened next. This girl. This fucking girl starts running the box cutter down her face. I don't mean just skimming over it either. I mean she was digging it as far into her

fucking skin as it would go then dragging it down her face. Over and over again and she was just giggling about it. The cuts kept coming, the blood kept flowing. And the sound...oh God the sound it made. I gag just thinking about it. Like a knife through a very raw steak.

I just stood there, watching in horror as she mutilated her face with the blade. I couldn't do anything. I felt sick. She just stared at me with those blank eyes and giggled some more. Fuck. There was so much blood and more came as she sliced through her eyelids and a white/red liquid oozed from the socket. She cut through her lips until they hung by nothing but a strand of meat and when the lips were gone she started on her gums and tongue. Just slicing and slicing. Oh God the sound...I couldn't watch anymore.

I turned away and began slowly making my way to the door. I had to get out of there. "Wait." I heard her mutter behind me. "Please God help me PLEASE!!" There was pain in her voice. So much pain. And it was HER voice. Not the childish tone she had before. I looked to her. She was on her hands and knees vomiting uncontrollably. In between retches she looked at me with begging eyes. HER eyes. I started to cry and sob like a fucking baby. I fell to my knees.

"HOW!?" I cried. "Tell me how! I'll do anything just tell me how!" I held my face and cried into my bloody hands. This was so fucked up. This was so fucked up. "Tell me how..." I whispered. Sniffling. "Let us in." That childish voice...I looked up and she stood over me.

Her face like bloody shredded meat. One blank eye looked down on me as I kneeled there, shaking from terror. "Let us in." She said with a smile as she raised the blade to her throat and sliced from side to side three times, spewing her blood all over me, and then she collapsed in a bloody heap. She was seizing, convulsing, dying...but she was still fucking smiling.

Then I ran. Covered in blood I ran out of the store, to my car, an I drove home. 120 miles and hour the whole way. When I got home I locked myself in the bathroom and sat in the shower, crying as scalding hot water washed away the blood. So much blood. That was 14 hours ago. My boss called me 100 times but fuck him. He didn't see it. He didn't see the smile. He didn't hear that childish voice demanding "Let me in."

Part 2

Thank you for all the positivity and support guys and girls. I truly appreciate it. I hope I can continue to keep you all updated. God bless. - Chris

It's early. Still dark outside. The thick humid air weighs heavy on me. Sweat trickles down my back and and mixes with the morning dew. The rest of the world is slowly waking up as I lay here in this poor family's back yard. God forgive me for what I've done...

I haven't slept since the incident. I couldn't sleep. Every time I tried closing my eyes I would see her face. Hear her begging for help. Those pleading eyes piercing through all that I am. What did she want? Someone to comfort her in her final moments? A savior? I'm no fucking hero and how was I supposed to know she would kill herself? Fuck man...

I'm disgusted with myself. I should've done something. Maybe if I had grabbed the blade she'd still be alive. In a hospital recovering from...whatever was affecting her. Surrounded by her family who loved and cared about her, Thanking God that she was safe. now she's dead and I can't help but feel responsible...

I'm not sure how long I've been out here, I just know the moon is now on the opposite side of the sky from where it had first appeared. Daybreak was coming. I lit my hundredth cigarette and inhaled deeply as I contemplated the events of the day before as the sun crept it's way over the tree line. A new day was coming...but was I ready for what came with it?

I had gone to see my doctor as was suggested to me. She's been my doctor my entire life and I tell her everything, but I decided to keep the details of the incident to myself. Instead I gave her some bullshit story about me and another guy getting into an accident at work resulting in me getting cut and my fellow employee bleeding on me.

She responded with "We'll do a basic screening for any blood related diseases you may have contracted aaaaaaand that cut is gonna need stitches." after she takes my blood and tells me my results will be ready tomorrow, a nurse stitches me up and I'm outta there. I didn't feel like being around people plus I had other business to attend to. I had to go back to the gas station. I needed to find out what happened.

Before I headed that way I decided I should probably alter my appearance a bit. I didn't want to show up and get hauled off by the cops as soon as I got there. So I stopped by my house and grab my handy dandy 'about to return to the scene of the crime and don't want to be identified' electric hair trimmers.

I stand in front of the mirror and glance at myself as I plug the hair trimmers in. Fuck I looked terrible. I had dark circles under my eyes and my eyes themselves were bloodshot from lack of sleep. I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed. Unfortunately if I wanted to look any different I had to shave it all off. "Here goes nothing." I mumbled to myself as I cut the first strip of hair. This process lasted about ten minutes and upon finishing I set the trimmers down and took a good look at my reflection.

It was bad. So fucking bad. I looked like a fucking sleep deprived skin head. There was only one way to make myself feel better, which involved me making stupid faces at my reflection and repeating "Would you fuck me? I'd fuck me. I'd totally fuck me."

This went on for about two minutes until I thought I saw my reflection smirk at me. Fucking smirk. I jumped back and instantly started shaking my head. I was so tired I was hallucinating. "Fuck you

reflection." I said as I walked out of the bathroom to get dressed.

A little while later I was finally in my car and headed to Texas. It was time to get to the bottom of things. When I was about twenty minutes from the gas station I get a call from my sister. I pick up my phone and her voice screams into my ear, "Hey you fucking fuck, how the fuck are yah!?" I wince back from my phone and my ears are ringing. "What the fuck do you want!?" I yell into my phone jokingly. "Jeez Chris, watch your fucking language." She replies with a slight laugh in her voice. "Can't a girl just call her big brother and catch up?" She added with mock sadness in her tone.

"No she can't." I responded with a smile. "Now what do you want?" She let out a long sigh "Ugh...fiiiiiiine. I went to see Dr. Anderson today and guess who I see walking out just as I'm parking?" She paused for a second. "You! You fucking idiot. I honked my horn like twenty times and you just kept on walking. Douche..." I must've been more out of it than I thought to not have noticed her. "Sorry I've got a lot on my mind." She must've been playing with her dog cause it kept barking over the phone. "Yeah what happened to you? I mean you looked like freeze dried dog shit." She said. She seemed to stop what she was doing and waited for my response.

I thought about it and decided to tell her. She's my sister. I can tell her anything. I go over the incident with her, sparring the overly gruesome details. Once I'm done I take in a deep breath and wait for her to speak. "Fuuuuuuck." Is the only thing she says. As you can see we're both pretty articulate speakers. After another pause she asks me in a very serious tone "Chris, are you using again?" This took me by surprise. I had a bit of a heroine problem in high school but after almost dying I never touched the stuff again. It's a sensitive subject in my family and we never brought it up after I got clean. So for her to ask me this was almost insulting.

"Dude, fuck you. No I'm not using again." I replied, slightly angered by her question. "You think I'm making this up!?" Another long pause filled the air. I could almost see her on the phone thinking very carefully about what she was going to say next. "No...it's just that...I don't know..." She was searching for something to say. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound accusing-" my phone cut out in the middle of her sentence. "Hello?" I asked. "Hey, sorry I think I hit a bad spot. I'm driving." The line was quiet. "You're a fucking joke." She finally said. I turned and looked at my phone, confused. "Uhhhh what?" Was all I could come back with. "You heard me. You're a fucking joke. Oh boo hoo a pathetic little fucking junkie has a hallucination and gets all upset about it."

I couldn't stop myself from getting pissed. "Fuck you Sandra." I said quietly. There was another moment of deafening silence between us. And then she just starts yelling into the phone at me. "You make me sick. You're a sorry fucking excuse for a man. Oh I'm so proud. MY brother the fucking junkie. What is it Chris? Can't get over how much a fuck up you are without shooting that shit into your arm?" As she's speaking I hear a slight giggle in her voice. Did she think this was fucking funny? "Why don't you just kill yourself Chris? Huh!? Fucking pathetic. You hear me? YOU! ARE! FUCKING! PATHE-!" I slammed my phone on my steering wheel. Over an over again. Little pieces of plastic and glass bounced around the inside of my car. The phone was destroyed, but I just kept beating the fuck out of it. My teeth were gritted and my blood was boiling. I had never been so...angry...Finally I dropped my phone and looked at my hand. I was bleeding badly. Tiny shards of bloody glass were sticking out of my palm. I was too pissed to feel pain. I wiped my hand on my jeans. "Fuck you Sandra..." I whispered. I just kept driving.

A short while later I arrived at the gas station where the incident had taken place. Still fuming from

me and Sandra's conversation, I parked my car. The place looked dead as usual. I expected cops and reporters everywhere with yellow tape covering every inch of free space. Instead I was greeted by complete and utter normalcy. What the fuck... I get out of my car and walk inside, keeping my head down the whole time. Instead of going to the register I head towards the bathroom.

When I reach the door I brace myself, took two deep breaths and grabbed the handle. I had to be ready for whatever the fuck was in there. Gradually I pull the door open. Inch by inch, keeping one eye closed and one barely open. "Fuck fuck fuck." I said to myself. "It's ok. You're fine. Don't be a fucking pussy. Just open the door and look inside."

With one more deep breath I shove through the door and find...nothing...absofuckinglutely nothing. There's no fucking body, there's no fucking blood, there's just nothing. I inspect the entire bathroom on my hands and knees and not a single trace of any fucking thing. I'm going crazy is the only thought I could form. I look at my wrist and sure enough there's still a cut there. So it HAD to have been real...but where's the fucking body...

I hear someone open the door and walk in and I instantly bolt up. Some trucker looking guy is there just staring at me while I'm silently shitting myself. After a few seconds he starts walking to a urinal and unzips his pants, giving me a 'this guy better not come near me look' while trying to seem casual. I feel my pulse slowly start to settle.

"Uhhhh...sup?" I croaked, feeling like a total fucking tool. He just nods and goes back to taking a piss. I can't get out of there fast enough. I start walking out of the store, my mind racing and from the register I hear "Chris?" I jump ten feet into the air and turn to see Pam looking at me with a wary expression. Like I was a mutant or something. I check my watch and can't believe it's already 8:00p.m. Pam's shift.

"Hey miss Pam." I reply, giving her a weak smile. I walk over to the counter and ask for a pack of camel blue shorts. After a moment of looking me up and down with a blank expression she grabs my smokes and puts them on the counter. As I'm reaching for my wallet she says, "Chris...what the hell happened last night?" I stopped and looked at her as I felt the blood drain from my face.

I couldn't say anything so she just starts talking so fast it's hard to keep up. "That girl goes into the bathroom and twenty minutes later I see you run out of here covered in blood and when I go in there to see what happened it looks like a goddamn butcher shop!" Her elderly voice was quivering. The poor women was as scared as I was.

"You saw her? You really fucking saw her?" I replied in barely a whisper. I couldn't stop shaking. "Of course I saw her!" She stated in a hushed yell. "Next thing I know, I'm trying to call the cops and three vans full of people pull up and some guy in a suit is making me sign confidentiality papers, telling me I didn't see a thing, while there's a crew of guys in jumpsuits cleaning up that blood bath in there. Then 'poof' they're gone!"

This didn't make sense. "Who were they?" I asked, dumbfounded. "Hell if I know." She replied rubbing her eyes. Then she reaches under the counter and pulls out a folded paper. "Here." She says as she slides it across the counter to me. "What's this?" I ask as I shakily pick it up. Not really paying the item any attention. "She left it for you. The girl. She said that I had to give this to the guy that was in the bathroom when he came out. She begged me. Said she needed help." I couldn't take my eyes off of the paper. "What the fuck...did she say anything else?" Pam looked down at her feet before

responding. "She said she was sorry to involve you, but it was the only way, and everything you need is in that note. What was she talking about?"

I ignored her question, eyeing the paper like it would explode at any moment while I held it. I had to process this. I began walking out of the store. "Chris, be safe." I heard Pam call after me. I kept walking. I sat in my car and opened the note. Something fell out of it onto my floorboard. I reached down and pick up a key. I stare at it, then turn my attention to the note. On it is an address, and one hastily scribbled sentence. I read it over and over again, silently begging for more meaning. But all it said was:

"She will tell you everything."

Part 3

Hey there everyone...so I just want to say thank you to all of you for taking the time to read my story, whether you believe it or not. All of your kindness and support have really helped me. God bless- Chris

It took me longer than expected to find the house. The address from the note was no more than a jumble of poorly scribed letters and numbers making it incredibly difficult to read, and thanks to my moment of temporary insanity, I couldn't use my busted cell phones GPS to find the place.

I spent hours traversing the back roads of a small Texas countryside settlement where houses were few and far between and I was more likely to see trees and cows rather than make any actual human contact. The sun had gone down hours ago leaving me surrounded by the dense blackness of night. I was close to giving up on my search, but by pure dumb luck I happened upon a gravel driveway with an old rusted mailbox standing at the end of it.

My headlights illuminated the numbers that told me I had finally reached my destination. I looked down the long path, my eyes clawing through the darkness in search of a house. The dense trees lining the driveway made it impossible, but the longer I stared I could start making out shapes which eventually turned into detailed images. I could see the house about two hundred yards away clear as day.

I turned down the gravel pathway slowly driving towards the house. Paranoia gripped my mind and I couldn't stop myself from looking around, trying to take in every detail. The house sat in what seemed to be a clearing in the trees, tucked away from the rest of the world, giving it that 'Texas Chainsaw Massacre' vibe. Although, once I actually reached the house there was nothing terrifying about it. If anything it was just a nice quaint family home. It was a white, two story house with black shutters and a red door, with wooden steps leading up to the large front porch, and a tire swing hanging from the oak tree in the front yard.

It all seemed so...normal. I put my car in park and shut off my headlights. I lit a cigarette as I scanned the rest of my surroundings, trying to take in every detail. There were two vehicles in the driveway and there were lights on in the house, so someone must've been home. I sat listening to the sounds of the woods surrounding me. I could hear every insect, every nocturnal creature moving about, every snapping tree branch. Each sound so vivid, so clear.

I got out of my car and extinguished my cigarette. I wasn't going to get anywhere just sitting there waiting for something to happen. With a confidence I didn't know I had, I walk towards the porch, up the steps, and to the front door. I breathed deeply through my nose and raised my hand to knock on the door, but stopped short as I caught a scent of something different. Something that didn't belong in this seemingly peaceful place. Blood...I smelled blood. Pungent and sharp, it filled my nostrils. Where was it coming from?

As I sat there sniffing the air I heard the sound of someone approaching the door from the inside of the house. Panic gripped me and I frantically started looking left and right for somewhere to hide. I stopped myself and took a deep breath. "Calm down." I muttered. "Calm the fuck down. It's probably just the owner wondering who's at their house in the middle of the night." I composed myself and waited for whoever it was to open the door.

I heard the door unlock and swing open. There stood an older woman, small and dainty, wearing a

yellow sundress. At first this struck me as odd, but I ignored that thought as she looked me up and down and began to speak. "Hi there!" She said excitedly in a slight southern drawl, smiling widely at me. "Quite the odd hour to be gallivanting around the woods dontcha think?"

I couldn't speak. I hadn't thought about what I was going to say once I actually got here. After a few awkward seconds of silence I finally managed to say something. "Uhhhh...hello...ummm...yeah sorry, I was told to come here by someone...a girl?" I muttered. Each word stumbling over one another. The woman just stared and kept smiling. "She was young? Black hair...?" I tried my best to describe the girl from the gas station.

After about a minute of silently staring and smiling at me the woman finally spoke. "Oh!!" She exclaimed. "You must be one of Kaitlyn's little friends! So nice to meet you! My names Debra! I'm Kaitlyn's mother." Kaitlyn...I finally had a name for the girl from the gas station. She reached out her hand and I shook it hesitantly. She seemed nice but I couldn't help feeling there was something slightly...off about this woman. "I'm Chris." I replied, trying to seem as casual as possible.

She let go of my hand and stepped back, opening the door a bit wider. "Well Kaitlyn ain't here right now but I'm sure she'll be back soon!" She said everything so excitedly. "Why don't you come on in and make yourself at home? Suppers on the table and we'd love for you to join us." I saw her left eye twitch a bit and her smile grow wider. There was something so fucking wrong about this...

Dinner? It was fucking midnight..."No that's alright." I said calmly. "I'll just come back tomorrow." I started to back away from the door, but she reached out and grabbed my wrist with a strength that didn't match her dainty appearance. "Nonsense." She stated quietly. Here eyes narrowing "Any friend of Kaitlyns' is considered family around here. I insist!" Before I could protest she started pulling me into the house, shutting the door behind me. Too late to go back now.

She started walking ahead of me. I looked around the house. Everything seemed normal enough. It looked like a house that a happy little family would live in. So why did I have such a fucked up feeling that something was wrong with all of this. "Come on now." Debra called to me. "The dining room is just through there. I'm gonna go give Kaitlyn a call and let her know we're waiting on her." I followed her directions and started walking towards the dining room as Debra disappeared around a corner.

I entered the dining room and stop dead in my tracks. And cover my mouth and nose. There, sitting at the end of the table, is an older man. Maybe early fifties. I assume it's Kaitlyns dad. His head is tilted back, mouth hanging open. Two bullet holes decorated his chest, leaving his white shirt stained red. I had found the source of the scent of blood and being so close only made the smell so much stronger. I made my way towards the body and discover another bullet hole right in the middle of his forehead.

I could tell from the pale color of his skin and the dried crusted blood that he'd been dead for quite some time. His cold dead eyes looked up at me, and with shaking hands I reached to cover them. What the fuck was going on...

I heard movement behind me and quickly turn to see Debra has returned. "Oh don't mind him sugar." She said cooly. "Frank doesn't speak much." She leaned towards me and hid her lips with her hand. "I think he gets shy around company." She whispered. I just stared at her in pure shock. I couldn't move. What the fuck was wrong with this woman?

She takes a seat at the other end of the table opposite of Frank and motions for me to sit down. In a

daze, I pull out a chair and sit. "I hope you like chicken." said Debra, as she laid a napkin in her lap and began pouring herself some wine. "I couldn't get ahold of Kaitlyn, but I'm sure she won't be much longer." I just sat staring at the plate sitting in front of me.

Finally I spoke. "Debra...what happened to Frank?" I squeaked. Any confidence I had earlier was long gone. I was terrified. She gave me a confused look but that wide smile never left her face. "What do you mean dear?" She said, as she scooped mash potatoes onto her plate. I became angry. "What do I mean?" I asked coldly, staring her dead in the eyes. "I mean he's fucking dead lady! Your husband is sitting here dead and you're acting like everything is fucking normal!?" I stood up from my seat and walk to Franks lifeless corpse and pointed. "Look at him." She stared down at her plate as she mixed gravy into her mashed potatoes, still smiling.

"FUCKING LOOK AT HIM!!" I screamed violently at her. She stopped what she was doing and looked up towards her husband. The smile slowly faded from her face until her expression was completely blank. The silence that filled the room was suffocating. Still staring at the body she spoke in a voice devoid of emotion.

"I made him an angel so he could fly fly away. Fly away little angel, fly fly away." She started repeating this over and over again in a soft whisper. Something was wrong with her. Her mind was broken. "Fly away little angel, fly fly away." She continued her insane mantra. This whole situation was fucked.

"Debra." I finally said. She ignored me, and kept whispering those same words, never taking her eyes off of Frank's corpse. "Fuck lady...what did you do?" I asked, shaking my head. She stopped her rant and looked up at me. "I'm an angel too now." She said, that wide smile creeping back onto her face. I just shook my head, looking at her with a defeated expression. I came here for answers and this woman clearly had none.

"I'm an angel too." She repeated, giggling. "Watch me fly away." She then brought her hand from under the table, and in it she held a small snub nose revolver. I took a step back in horror, certain I was about to die. "Fly fly away." Was all she said as she put the barrel of the gun into her mouth. "NO!" Was all I could shout as she pulled the trigger. The gun erupted in a loud explosion and the wall behind her was instantly covered in blood. Her body slumped forward and heavily fell from the chair, finally landing on the floor with a solid thump. The gun skittered across the floor and stopped after making contact with the dining room wall.

"What the fuck...what the fuck." I whispered to myself. I started hyperventilating. My heart was beating a hole in my chest. I rubbed my face. What now? I was supposed to get answers. Instead I witnessed yet another suicide. None of this made sense. I felt like God was punishing me for something. Making me go through all of these horrors for some past transgression.

As I stood there feeling sorry for myself, I heard small footsteps behind me. "Mommy?" Uttered a small voice. I turned to see a little black haired girl in pink, Dora the explorer pajamas, standing in the dining room entrance, staring at me with wide eyes. She was dragging an old teddy bear behind her. I instantly forgot about myself and moved towards the girl. I couldn't let her see this. I grabbed her hand and gently pulled her away from the horrific scene and sat her on the couch in the living room.

"Hi there." I said in a coaxing voice. "My names Chris. What's yours?." She sat there giving me that

wide eyed stare for a few seconds before telling me. "Mia..." She said. "What happened to mommy and daddy?" She asked, a slight whimper in her voice. It hurt to lie to this kid, but I couldn't very well say "Your mom went fucking nuts, killed your dad, then blew her own brains out." So I just sat there giving my best fake smile before finally replying "Oh them? Don't worry. They're fine."

She just kept staring at me. A few seconds passed of me scratching my head, and thinking of what to say next before she spoke again. "Did my sister send you?" She asked. I stopped what I was doing and looked at Mia. She was pulling on the ear of the teddy bear. "Kaitlyn said she would send someone here to help us." I couldn't speak. I could barley breath as I waited for her to say something else. So this was who was going to tell me everything? A little girl...I shook my head in confusion.

Mia hopped down from the couch and grabbed my hand. "Come with me." She said, as she started to shuffle down a hallway, dragging me behind her. What now? Where was she taking me? I followed obligingly. She lead me to the end of the hall where two doors faced each other. She pointed to one door and said, "That's my room." I nodded and gave another fake smile. Then, she pointed to the other door and said "That's Kaitlyns room." I looked at the door and saw that someone had recently hastily attached a latch from which a padlock hung.

It took me a moment to remember the key I had gotten in the note. I pulled it from my pocket, unlocked the padlock, and pushed the door open. Mia stepped into the room and pointed to a laptop that sat on a desk on the other end of the bedroom. "Kaitlyn said to make you watch." Mia said, as she stuck her thumb into her mouth. I nodded in understanding, walked to the desk, and turned on the laptop.

On the desktop there was only one icon. A video file titled 'WATCH ME'. I clicked it and a webcam video opened, in which the girl from the gas station sat staring back at me through the screen. Only now she looked completely normal. Very tired but normal. Mia walked up behind me as the video started.

"You don't know me." Said Kaitlyn on the video. "And I don't know you. And I'm so sorry for whatever I've done. I didn't want to drag anyone else into this, but I needed help." She continued as I watched in silence. "I don't have much time so I'll be quick. Something is happening to me and the people responsible are after me. By now they're probably after you too."

I remembered Pam's story about the men in the vans that appeared at the gas station after I'd left. The video kept going. "I thought that what was happening was only affecting me...but...somehow it's spreading. My family is starting to suffer from the same things as me. Hearing things, seeing things, hurting ourselves...me and everyone I come into contact with...including you, is in danger." This explained the scene in the dining room. But was she saying I would suffer a similar fate?

"I'm not myself when...whatever it is takes over...I lose control. But sometimes I'm clear headed enough to make rational decisions, hence, the note and key you obviously received if you're watching this." I watched in awe as she continued to explain. "Don't listen to the voices. They aren't real. And DON'T let the people who did this to me catch you. They're dangerous. And you have to seclude yourself. Stay away from people. Stop this from spreading. And again I am so sorry for bringing you into this, whoever you are. But..."

The girl on the video paused to wipe her eyes. "I need one last thing from you." She finally continued, a stray tear rolling down her cheek. "Mia if you're there...just know that I love you so much and you have to be strong." She sobbed. I looked down and saw Mia looking at the screen with those same

childish wide eyes.

"Look whoever you are...I know you don't owe me any favors but please...PLEASE just do this for me..." I wasn't breathing anymore and the room felt small. I waited and listened. "Mia please cover your ears." Said the video of Kaitlyn, tears running freely down her face now. I watched as Mia listened to her older sister.

"What I'm about to ask you to do is terrible and I'm sorry but...I need you to...kill my sister..." I stood up from the screen. "No..." I said in barely a whisper. The video continued. "It's her only hope...if this...madness doesn't kill her then THEY will... And either way she will suffer so much ...So please. Please for the love of God just do it. If not for me then for her..." I couldn't stop shaking my head. This was so fucked up. I couldn't believe this was happening. This isn't happening...please God, no this isn't happening.

I looked down at Mia who still had her ears covered as she watched the screen. "I'm so sorry for all of this." said the video of Kaitlyn as she reached up, pressed a button, and the screen went black. The video was over. I stepped back, shaking my head. "No. No. No." was all I could manage to say.

But then I remembered Kaitlyn's face when she had come to me in the bathroom. How she begged for help after tearing her face apart with the box cutter...could I really live with myself if I let this little girl suffer like that? Fuck...

I felt sick as I asked Mia to go play in her room. She happily went, dragging her teddy bear with her. I walked back to the dining room and picked up the gun. Without taking another look up at the horrific scene I had left there, walked back to Mia's room, and stood in the doorway. The gun was shaking in my hand.

I stood and watched her. She was sitting on the floor facing away from me, playing with her toys. "You know your sister loved you very much don't you?" I croaked. "Yeah." She said sadly. "And she would do anything to take care of you?" I asked. "Yeah." She repeated. We were both quiet for a moment. "I know what you have to do." She finally said. I just looked at the ground. I fought back watering eyes.

"I never listen when Kaitlyn tells me to cover my ears. I do it but I still listen." She said a bit mischievously, as only a child can. I couldn't help but smile a bit. "But it's okay. I know she wouldn't want this if she didn't think it was the right thing to do." She continued. I nodded slowly. "So it's okay. Can you just make it not hurt?" She asked.

I took in a shaking breath. "Yeah." I replied quietly. "Promise?" She asked. Her words cut me like a knife. She sounded scared. "Yes. I promise." I croaked out. She just nodded, still facing away from me. I raised the gun slowly. I had to use both hands to hold it steady. My heart was pounding in my ears. I squeezed my eyes shut tightly...and pulled the trigger. A loud bang erupted and my ears started ringing.

I fell to my knees and screamed. A long, agonizing scream. I screamed and screamed till my throat was raw, then I screamed some more. I cried harder than I've ever cried before. I was a coughing, crying mess. My body wanted to vomit but there was nothing in my stomach. I sat on my knees crying, coughing, and dry heaving with my eyes closed. I didn't want to see what I had done...God what I had done?

...

I sat in the back yard, smoking a cigarette. I couldn't cry anymore, couldn't hurt. I was empty. I just sat and stared at the dark, early morning sky.

I was done. I was so fucking done with all of this. I grabbed the gun and raised it to my head. I was ready to die. I pulled the trigger.

Click.

I winced and looked at the gun, then raised it to my head again. I pulled the trigger.

Click. Click. Click. Click.

Fuck...no bullets. I stood up and threw the gun into the woods with a snarl. "FUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!!!" I screamed. I was breathing heavily and sweating. I sat back down and put my face in my hands. And just stayed there.

Suddenly I felt a familiar touch on my back. I looked up and saw my father squatting beside me. "It's all gonna be okay son." He said comfortingly. "How?" I asked, almost pleading for an answer. "Please tell me how?" He just smiled at me and said, "just let us in." And then, almost as quickly as he had come, he vanished.

I heard noise behind me. Multiple heavy footsteps. I didn't bother looking up. I didn't try running. I knew what they were here for. I heard the sound of a walkie talkie and gruff voice say "Sir? Yeah we got him." I just smiled an evil grin and stood up. I knew what I had to do.

Part 4

I had no idea where I was. I only knew that it was uncomfortably warm and every hour two men would come into the small room I was being held in, tear away the black bag that covered my head, and with both hands tied behind my back, they would question me.

Question after question after fucking question. For every smart ass remark I made I was given a nice beating. This just made me laugh. I was positive I had finally lost my mind. The harder they beat me, the harder I laughed. Even when I started coughing up blood, I laughed. I couldn't feel a thing. I was numb.

After a while they gave up. After countless hours of interrogation they just left me alone with my thoughts in that dark room. I just sat there, bleeding and smiling. I don't even know why I was smiling. I just couldn't help myself.

"I'm bored." I heard a small voice say. I looked up to see Mia standing in front of me holding her teddy bear. "Can we go play now?" She asked. My jaw hung to the floor as I stared at her with wide eyes. I must've been hallucinating again. I squeezed my eyes shut tightly. "You're not real." I said. "You're not fucking real."

It was quiet for a moment. Then I felt a small, cold hand touch my forehead. My eyes shot open and I looked up. She was still there, just staring at me. Her eyes were wide and glowed white in the darkness. I could just barely make out her small features. "You're not Mia." I said. "Mia's dead...so who...what are you?"

She stood there silently staring at me. I could feel her eyes penetrate me. Like they were digging through my soul, searching for something deep within. "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU!?" I screamed angrily. Finally it spoke. But not in Mia's voice. It sounded like thousands of voices whispering in unison, fading in and out of existence.

"We are all that ever was and ever will be." It said, still staring with emotionless white eyes. "We transcend existence and know no end, no oblivion." It's words made no sense to me in logical terms. Yet somehow I understood what it meant. "What do you want with me?" I asked. "Let us in." It said. "Let us in and all will become clear."

What did it mean? I stared at it for a moment before shutting my eyes. "Okay." I said, nodding in defeat. "Okay..." It came out in a whisper. And then, all at once I felt something shift inside of me. My body seemed to fill with some strange energy. It's as if I was growing...evolving. This alien power filled me to the brim an I felt myself begin to tear apart at the seams. It felt so utterly amazing and breathtakingly painful at the same time. I fell from my chair and began writhing in agony, or was it bliss? I could feel the blood rushing through my veins. I could hear the synapses in my brain firing off. It's as if my body was completely tuned in to itself and everything around it. The last thing I remember was letting out a feral roar and then, as quickly as it had come, it ended. And I faded into the dark abyss of unconsciousness.

...

I jolted upright, gasping for air and dripping with cold sweat. My eyes darted around my room. MY room. How the hell did I end up here? I sat in my bed trying to calm my breathing. Had it all been a nightmare? Then I noticed my laptop open on my desk, a video file opened on the screen.

I got out of my bed, and walked to my desk. I noticed a cellphone I had never seen before and a travel brochure for Georgia sat on the keyboard. I inspected them both for a moment, then turned my attention back to the video. I pressed play.

The screen went black and the video began playing. It was a webcam video of...me. What the fuck? I don't remember making a video. Hell I'm not sure if I even know how to work my webcam. The video started with me just staring at the camera. But what truly shocked me was the fact that I was covered in blood. I examined myself and found no blood which confused the fuck out of me. The 'me' on the video began to speak.

"Listen up fucker." He said smirking. "Pack your bags. We're going to Atlanta."

September 2014

What Happened on My Drive Home Last Night?

by toolongadrive

Winner - September Monthly Contest

Part 1

ORIGINAL POST 08/31/2014 - Six-thirty in the evening. Clock out, collect personal items. Say "see you next shift" to the only coworker I can actually tolerate for a full nine hours. Get in car, begin long commute home. Right out of parking lot, left onto highway. Drive ten miles, take exit to old country road. Drive fifty-seven miles on said old country road. Right on dimly lit gravel road, drive three-quarters of a mile, arrive home around eight.

This is my normal routine at the end of the day. Most people think that's too long of a commute for a crappy, minimum-wage job, but I don't mind it too much. I live alone (aside from a Weimaraner named Gunner) in a two-story, ranch style home in the middle of BFE, both of which I inherited after my parents divorced and my father passed away.

She got to keep everything else, he just wanted the old, quiet house, where he could spend the rest of his days with his best friend, unbothered. I'll admit, it gets lonely living so far from anyone I know, but I just can't imagine paying for a place in the city, when this is free, and much larger than anything I could afford. And, of course, there's Gunner, who seems to care for me by obligation, but doesn't really want anything to do with me. He keeps to himself, normally napping beside dad's old recliner, and makes his occasional rounds to make sure no one is on our property that shouldn't be. I'm sure if I ever made him move from this house, he'd hate me, so, that's that.

Plus, nothing compares to the gorgeous colors that burst from the horizon, and the feeling of driving into a new sunset every evening. The brilliant shades of orange, pink, purple, and red that swirl together and make something different every time... I don't think I'll ever get tired of that view, and that, combined with having no one but Gunner to come home to, a quick commute isn't really necessary.

So, like I said, my commute home is pretty much exactly the same every evening.

Until last night.

Six-thirty in the evening. Clock out, collect personal items. Say "see you Tuesday" (I have off the today and tomorrow for the holiday) to the only coworker I can tolerate for a full nine hours. Get in car, begin long commute home. If only I knew how long today's would truly be... Right out of parking lot, left onto highway. Drive ten miles, take exit to old country road.

The sunset isn't as beautiful is it normally is... in fact, it's kind of unsettling. The whole sky is this deep purple, with veins of red running through it- not in the cotton-candy swirl like fashion you'd normally expect, but sharp lines, like crimson lighting bolts that held their place. I guess I didn't notice on the highway, what with the walls and trees and heavy traffic. But now I'm driving straight into it, and it's all I see. I've never seen anything like it. I'll have to research it when I get home, I

guess.

I've driven about twenty miles down the old country road by now; I've already passed the abandon barn that marks mile eighteen. The sky darkened unusually fast- it's never black this time of year until I reach mile fourth-eight, but tonight all I can see is the headlights behind me, the bit of road that my lights illuminate, and the stars.

Nine more miles under my belt, and now I'm the only one on the road, as far as I can see. The car that was behind me turned off at a gas station about a mile back. Quite honestly, that confused me, since I don't remember seeing a gas station on the way to work this morning, or ever in the past four years that I've been driving this route. I chalked it up to the fact that I could drive this in my sleep, and my surroundings are probably irrelevant at this point. I must have just missed it being built, having other things on my mind.

I've driven about twenty-two more miles with no other car in sight. Most people who live out here don't work weekends, so I guess that's understandable. Since everything is now completely black, and there's no star or headlight to be found, I'm running with my high beams on. I recently installed those 10kHIDS that are ridiculously blue, so at leash there's that.

Two more miles, and now I'm wondering if my count is off because I should be able to see my street light by now. It's the only light for five miles either way, and I can always see it from at at least three out. Maybe the bulb went out.

Six more miles. I've driven six more miles. I should've reached the gravel drive two miles ago, but there hasn't been a single lamp post, turn off, or really anything at all since the gas station. No other car, no porch light off in the distance of houses set back off the road. Absolutely nothing.

I haven't been drinking, I've never done a drug in my life, and I haven't taken any pain or cold meds. I don't have any health or mental conditions. I've never hallucinated in my life. So why in the hell have I driven a solid two, now three miles over on a commute that's always been the same time and distance? Why did I pass a gas station that I can swear wasn't there this morning, and why was the sky so grotesquely bloody looking when I got on this road?

I've decided to floor it- maybe I was driving slower than normal. Twelve miles later, still nothing. Nothing, besides the fact that I now have no service to my radio, and the clock in my dash has started glitching. If the radio is off, it says 00:00. If I try to find a station, it just flashes different numbers as if it can't decide what time it is. I'm leaving it off; nothing but static anyways.

Nineteen more miles down, and I'm low on gas. Maybe I should've stopped at that station. Still no sign if my drive or any other turn off. My only options are to pull over, or keep driving. If I turn around and try to get back to the station, I'll surely run out of gas before then. Flooring it was a bad idea.

I'm too chicken to pull over- I've seen those movies where the axe murder drags you into the field and has his way with you. I'll pass on that, and take my chances driving. My phone doesn't have service now, either, which is odd because my carrier just put a new tower out here for the residents not even three months ago.

I've driven at least thirty more miles by now, and still nothing. My phone blacked out even though it has 23% battery life, my radio and clock are still freaking out, and there's still nothing. Now I'm concerned.

Two miles further and I finally see light. Not my street light, but two small lights in my rear view. The yellowish specks are getting larger and larger, much too quickly. Whoever is behind me is hauling ass, and not aware that I'm in front of them. I keep driving for the next mile, faster than I should considering my gas situation. The lights behind me show no sign of slowing. They're much too close to me now, and brighter than any light I've ever seen.

My whole car is flooded with yellow light, and the sky is suddenly blazing red. Maybe it's just an illusion due to the headlights behind me, but I don't like it. I veer off the road, coming to an abrupt stop on the right side, letting the lights and the massive eighteen-wheeler they belonged to plow past me. And just light that, as quickly as the light had flooded my car and the red taken over the sky, it was all black again. All except my headlights, and the lamp post six feet in front of me.

It's definitely my gravel drive, because the lamp post marking it is dented in the same place my buddy hit mine with his dirt bike during one of his drunken, adventurous escapades. I gather myself, trying with all my might not to have some sort of nervous, emotional break down from all the confusion. I slowly turn on my drive, feeling every bump of gravel under my tires, comforted by the distant sound of Gunner barking a half-assed "welcome home" of sorts, as he always does.

I pull up to the house, looking the same as it has since my dad first left it to me. I sit, trying to muster the strength to get out and run to the door. I feel so drained, and obviously stiff from driving at least two and a half hours on that damned country road alone. I go to grab my phone from the middle console and realize my clock has finally changed, but it's still incorrect- I WISH it were seven-fifty. It's probably almost ten by now, if not later.

I grab my phone and the rest of my stuff and head inside, locking the car behind me. Gunner greets me at the door, making it clear I haven't fed him all day. I fill his bowl, plug my phone in on the counter, and lock all the doors and windows for the night, just for good measure. I hear my phone ding, indicating it's back on. Seven-fifty-five. My phone's screen reads 7:55. So does the microwave, and my laptop that I left open on the dining room table.

How did I drive more than double the miles in half the time? As if everything else that happened wasn't confusing enough. I've tried to sleep it off, pretend like this was all some weird dream. The type of dream you get when you eat pepperoni before bed, or the type of thing I'd imagine you experience when you do drugs.

But I have too many questions to sleep. I've been up all night and all morning trying to find some answers, with no luck. So here I am, consulting with the all-knowing community of /r/nosleep.

What the hell happened to me on my drive home last night?!

Part 2

UPDATE #1 09/01/2014 - My phone battery is low, and I'm sitting inside the shop lobby while my car gets worked on. My break lights aren't working (shocker), and I'm having them check everything else to make sure everything else is okay. But I do have an update...

So I decide to go check out the gas station, and bring Gunner with me for good measure. I don't know what I expect to happen, but having company makes the suspense less terrifying.

Maybe there will be a cashier who could answer my questions... Maybe it won't be there at all. That would make this so much easier, supporting the theory of just a bad hallucination.

I drive up the old country road (thankfully the mile count was like it should be), and I could see the station in the distance. It was there, alright. I felt a my stomach turning from the nerves as we pulled closer. It was there, but it was closed. By closed, I don't mean "closed in observance of the holiday" or "closed for the weekend"- I mean closed for years, abandoned and falling apart.

I drive this road every day for four years, and never see a single station. I see it for the first time, on the weirdest night of my life, and it looks brand new and fully functioning. Now I go to check it out (and hopefully fill up my tank and some extra gas cans), not even forty-eight hours later, and it looks like a set design for a post-apocalyptic movie. Paint pealing, window cracked, sign falling, trash everywhere. I'm pretty sure there's a sleeping bag behind the dumpster over there.

And Gunner doesn't like it one bit. Most car rides, he's chill, just sitting in the passenger seat, head out the window. Not this time. Before I even pull in, he's bowed up and growling. I park the car in the middle of the small lot, and he's barking louder and more aggressively than I've ever witnessed of him in his life.

We stay in the car, parked in the same spot. He finally calms back down to a low growl, but he's set on something. After a while, a local cop pulls up beside me and rolls his window down. He asks if he can help me, and I ask if he knew how long this station has been closed. He just transferred in from out of town and doesn't know anything about it.

He kindly tells me that I'm technically trespassing and that I should move along, but I sense an underlying tone of concern, as if he knows something more than he's letting on. But that was all he'd say, so I put my car and drive and got back on the road. We both headed into town, me in the lead to find a functioning gas station, him following to head back to the station or finish his rounds, I guess.

After a brief stop at the one red light on this whole street, he flashes he's lights at me and I pull over, assuming I didn't stop long enough or something. He comes up to my window and informs me about my break lights (or lack there of), and offers to follow me to the local mechanic. I thank him, and think to myself that I'm really thankful to not have to drive alone, in case the sky decides to get weird again.

So here I am, sitting in the shop lobby, waiting for them to finish the car, charging my phone in the corner, posting this update. Gunner is tied up outside in the shade with a big bowl of water. The cop left once he knew we were taken care of, and he gave me his number in case I need anything. He even went and filled my gas cans for me while my car is on the rack before he left... What does he know?

I might stay in town 'til sundown, and see if I can get in the gas station. It's strange, Gunner never freaks out like that. Something is in there that tipped him off.

Aaand now he's barking again. I should probably go see what's got him this time. I'll update as soon

as I can, y'all.

Part 3

MINOR UPDATE AND BACKSTORY 09/02/2014 – I spent all the time I could last night, before finally passing out, trying to upload the few pictures I managed to get. I took some of y'alls advice- phone on the dash to film, pictures of the gas station in daylight and at night, etc.

I filmed my whole drive, making sure that the road ahead was in full view of the camera, and even making sure to stop the tape and start a new one periodically, so I'd have multiple small files instead of one massive one. Once I made it home, I sat down to review those first to see if there was anything I could have missed while driving, or to see if there was anything worth posting… there wasn't. Every single video was just a silent, black screen for the duration of the minutes I filmed. Worthless.

The pictures, on the other hand… those are still on the devices, the same way they were the second I took them. I have some on my phone, and some on my buddy's camera that I borrowed. Things I really need you guys to see. But I can't get them up to save my life.

I transferred all the images from the camera and phone to my laptop, and tried uploading them from there. I tried uploading them straight from my phone. I printed all the images, scanned them, saved them in a new folder, and tried uploading those. I took pictures of the prints and tried uploading them. Every time I'd select a photo to upload, it would do it's thing and all. Normal, right? No. No matter what picture I selected, no matter what folder it was saved in, no matter what device it came from, every single time, it would upload as the picture of Gunner that I linked in the comments on my first post.

It even did it when I tried to upload the pictures straight from my phone, and I don't even have the picture saved on there anymore. I cleared all my pictures to make room for the videos beforehand, just in case. No matter what I do, it's always just the same, precious picture of Gunner.

I've never been a believer in the paranormal or extraterrestrial, but someone doesn't want these pictures and videos seen by anyone else, and that's evident.

I'll keep trying after work to upload the pictures (maybe I'll try on my work computer during my break and see what happens…). I really don't want to update on last night's events without those photos, because I feel like I can't even describe what happened without showing you. I still don't believe everything, myself. Forgive me, y'all. If anyone knows of any other way I can get these pictures up, PLEASE help me.

In the meantime, I'll give a bit of a back story regarding my dad and our house, and answer some of the more commonly asked questions that seem the most important/relevant to resolving this. I'll try my best to still respond to the comments, but I know not everyone reads them, so I figured it best to briefly answer them here.

On each end of the old country road is a small town that leads into a bigger city. If you travel between the two, you have the option of the straight-through, old country road with all it's bumps and endless fields, or you can take the highway that goes out and around all the farmland, with distant views of the surrounding cities.

I grew up in a townhouse in the city opposite of the one I work in now. My mom had an office in one of the nicest buildings there. My dad had his own construction company, and most of his jobs took place in the country, which he loved. My parents have very different lifestyle preferences.

My uncle had a house built for his family out in the quiet country, and my dad's company was the one who built it. Once it was finished, my dad and I spent every Saturday there. They would grill the best burgers around, and focus the entire day on college football. I would hang out on the front porch with my aunt and my two little cousins, talking about anything and everything. Sometimes my mom would join us, but she'd usually just go shopping with her sister, or have a spa day until we came back home.

When my uncle got a huge job opportunity out of state, he offered to sell the house to my dad at the cost of what he still owed on the building loan. My uncle wasn't asking for a profit, and it was my dad's dream house. Without even consulting my mom, my dad said yes. By the time my uncle was ready to move out and we were ready to move in, I was starting college, so we just made the transition all at once. Saved me from having to pack twice.

Once I finished school, I moved into a studio apartment in the same city I grew up in. I wanted to be close to both of my parents until I could figure out what my next step was; my parents were finalizing their divorce ("irreconcilable differences"). Here's where Gunner makes his debut. When things started going downhill between my parents, my dad wanted someone who could always keep him company, especially since his brother lived so far away. He'd always wanted a Weimaraner, anyways. Gunner was the cutest puppy I had ever seen, and the bond between my dad and him was straight out of a movie.

Post-divorce, my mom moved back into the city, and my dad stayed at the house in the country. Everyone was finally calming down, and we were all making it work. Both of my parents seemed happier in their elements, where they were always meant to be, and that made me happy. But then dad got sick. It was just a lot of things all at once, that slowly became too much for his body to handle. The doctors blamed it on the 30+ years of physical work, constantly in the sun, combined with the stress of a divorce and the additional hereditary medical issues.

The first year wasn't so bad, but eventually I quit my job in the city and moved in to help take care of him. I got two solid years with him, by his side every day. I learned a hell of a lot more about football than I'll ever need to know, and I can grill a pretty mean steak, now. Every day was the same, but every day was special. Coming down stairs in the morning to see him sitting in his old recliner watching his favorite game film, Gunner laying on the floor right next to the chair, usually on a blanket dad laid down for him. Coffee already brewed for me, bacon on the skillet. No matter how sick he was, breakfast was always priority. We always ate dinner at the table…granted, you could still here the game films from the living room tv, but we sat in the dining room no matter what. It was a tough two years, watching my dad lose his strength, but for those two years I will always be thankful.

After he passed, I knew I needed to stay. Stay because I knew he'd turn over in his grave before he'd ever let that house go, and stay because, just like I needed him, his four-legged best friend needed me. So I did my grieving, I had my time, and I made the house a home, even in it's emptiness. I decided to find a job, the job I have now, in the city I'd visited once, maybe twice in my life. I chose that city over the one I was raised in, only because it was a hair closer to the house, and because I figured a change of scenery would be nice.

It's been a little over four years since he's passed, but Gunner and I have been making it. I just hope that we can do the same through this… whatever this is.

Part 4

UPDATE #3 09/03/2014 –

***After trying some of y'alls suggestions, as well as a few other ideas, I finally have a couple pictures. I was only able to salvage the ones from my phone, but at least I have what I really need you to see. The only thing that worked was putting my coworker's SIM card in my phone, texting the pictures to a new email, saving them onto his computer, and then uploading them. I don't know why that, of all the options, was the one that worked, but I won't complain. I was only able to do this with a few pictures before I had to give his SIM back so he could leave, so I prioritized. They're all pretty dark, because I went at night and didn't want to use flash and attract attention. But somehow, there's this weird light streak on them. I don't know if my phone lens is messed up, or what. Hopefully I can get that looked at soon.

So here's the update:

I exit the shop lobby to see what has Gunner all worked up. He's barking just as aggressively as he was at the gas station, and he's pulling so hard against his leash that I'm afraid it could snap from his harness. I follow his gaze and the direction he's "pointing" in to find a semi-truck, with a massive dent in its side, has just parked in the lot. I should probably say "bump", instead, because it looks like something large and heavy dented the metal wall from the inside-out.

The drive has just gotten out of the cab when I'm walking outside, handing his keys over to the head mechanic. I watch as he walks towards the shop, not directly towards me, but to the drink machine off to my left. Gunner pays no attention to him, he just continues on at the truck across the lot. The drive gets his drink and sits in one of the faded lawn chairs beside the machine.

Trying to make small talk, I ask him where he's headed, and he mentions a town I've only vaguely heard of that's a few cities over. He asks about my car and about Gunner (by now he's sitting beside me, still eyeing the truck, but he's quieted down). I ask if he happened to drive down my road the other night, and he says today is his first time in this town- he was running the highway when his "check engine" light came on, so he pulled off at the first exit he saw. I don't know whether or not to believe him, but they're pulling my car off the rack now, so I don't have an excuse to just keep asking this guy questions.

Turns out both of my break lights were fried, no telling when that happened. They replaced them, as well as my timing belt, since I passed the suggested mileage. They inspected everything else, but didn't find any other problems, so Gunner and I load up and head to my buddy's apartment.

I have him meet me outside to talk, since dogs aren't allowed in the building and I'm not leaving Gunner outside, alone. I tell him about my car problems, and ask him if he's ever noticed the gas station, leaving out the other events. I trust him, but I don't want to involve him in anything until I know it's safe. He doesn't recall there being a gas station there, but he doesn't come over often, since we work conflicting shifts, and when we do hang out it's with our other friends at the local sports bar or something.

He used to dabble in photography, and he was actually pretty good, but he got bored with it. He still has a few good cameras, so I ask if I can borrow one for a project I'm working on. He lends me a camera, some memory cards, a spare battery, and the charger. Thankfully, he's not too curious.

Gunner and I spend the rest of the afternoon in the park. We sit in the grass down by the pond, and he's

content with just laying down and resting. A little girl wants to play with him; he licks her face from her chin to her eyes, and she thinks it's the silliest thing she's ever experienced. He's always been exceptionally good with kids, and I'm glad he can have some pleasant attention, compared to the morning he's had.

Sundown finally comes around, and we head to the gas station. There's no street lamps around, and none of the lights on the station work. I park and turn off the car, so no light is coming from us, either- I don't want to attract ay unnecessary attention. I sit there for a few minutes, contemplating just leaving. Gunner is quiet, but I can tell his senses are heightened. I finally gather up the camera equipment (and my courage), leash Gunner, and together we start to scope the property. Nothing out of the ordinary, just random trash and debris.

STATION

After circling the building, I decide to take my chances and try to get inside. All the doors are locked, but one of the windows in the back is broken. I tie Gunner's leash to a pipe against the wall and use an empty bottle I found on the ground to push away any of the reaming glass in the window. I look to make sure there's no one inside, and climb through. I quickly find and unlock the back door and untie Gunner. We go inside, shutting the door behind us, but leaving it unlocked in case we need to leave quickly. He's still quiet, but he's begun sniffing around as if he's picked up a scent and is trying to track it.

I look around, keeping Gunner on a tight leash (for his safety), but letting him lead. I don't find anything but trash, old food, and the occasional dead bug. We go through every aisle, looking from anything unusual our out of place. Most of the candy and snacks on the shelves are non-perishable, but of the ones I find with actual expiration dates, most are still good. I decide to check the counter and registers to see if there's any receipts or files with dates on them, but all the records have been cleared out. Same for the back office.

INSIDE

Gunner is still sniffing around, getting more impatient in his search, but I've just about given up hope that we'll find any answers here, and start heading for the back door. Suddenly, Gunner's leash is pulled from my hand as he takes off to sniff beneath a door I didn't think to check before. He's scratching at the door, as if he's desperate to get in. I stand there, staring at the door and Gunner's frantic attempt to get in, torn between my fear of finding out what's on the other side, and my slightly greater fear of never getting answers.

Finally, I give in, mainly because I know if I don't, Gunner will hurt himself trying to tear through the door. Under my breath I count to three, and rip the door open like you do when you pull off a band-aid. No monsters, no aliens, no homeless men with machetes. Just a dusty old broom closet, empty, aside from a single cardboard box, closed on the ground. Gunner almost immediately starts whining and clawing at the box, as if I hid his favorite toy in there or something.

Nervously, I pull one of the top flaps of the box to begin opening it, and my stomach begins to turn in the process. I don't understand. Why- how- is the hoodie that my dad always wore on cold winter nights, the one I keep on my closet's top shelf and wear when I really miss him, now in this cardboard box, in the closet of an abandoned gas station that didn't exist before this weekend? Why- how- is it folded on top of a stack of prints of that picture of Gunner?

BOX1

BOX2

BOX3

BOX4

I drop the camera in the box, grab it and Gunner's leash, and bolt out of there. With the box in the back seat and Gunner in the front, I drive home faster than I ever have. It's beyond me that I didn't blow a tire or anything, but at that moment it didn't matter. Someone was in our house, with our things, with his picture. But when we got there, everything was in its place. The doors were all locked like I had left them, as well as the windows (I've always been good about that, since I live alone). Had I not found the box, I would never assume anyone had been here besides Gunner and I. I ran upstairs to check my room- everything was just as it should be, aside from the hoodie missing from its place.

I hadn't worn it in a while, so it could have been missing for days, weeks even, and I may not have known. But no matter when it was, someone was in my house. I went back down stairs, turning every light on along the way. I immediately start trying to upload those pictures, but you know what happened there. Gunner curls up by dad's old recliner, clearly tired and upset, and I put the hoodie beside him to make him feel better.

I find the cop's cell phone number and contemplate calling him for company. I decide to call the station first, to see if his story lines up- surprisingly, it does. Recent transfer, enough experience to be out on his own. Gunner seemed to like him, so I give him a call. He must've written down the number wrong or something's wrong with his line, because I get that automated message that tells you the number you're trying to reach is not in service. Great.

I spend half the night trying to get the damn pictures to upload, but they don't. So I pack a small bag, triple check that everything is locked, and Gunner and I spend the rest of the night in a motel in town. Most of the ones around here don't allow animals, but thankful I know the girl working the counter, and she lets it slide.

I can't sleep much, but at least I can watch TV without jumping every 10 seconds. I take a shower to clear my head, Gunner alternating pacing and laying on the tile floor, waiting for me. Once the sun is up, I load us back up and we head back to the house to check on things. Everything still seems the same, everything is still exactly as we left it. I call in sick from work to keep an eye on Gunner and do research. I pack up my laptop and anything else we may need, and we begin walking out the door to find the cop walking up the front steps.

I'm caught off guard, but pleased to see a comforting face. He greets Gunner with an ear-scratch, and then tells me that we need to talk… his voice is kind but his eyes are concerned. I immediately ask him what he knows, and he simply answers "enough". He can't tell me what "it" is, but that he's here because of it, to investigate and end it. Before I even tell him what all has happened, he tells me that Gunner and I should get out of town for a few days. It isn't a threat, it's a desperate warning.

He helps me pack up any valuable or sentimental items, as well as Gunner's things. He gives me his correct number (a digit was written wrong the first time), and hands me an envelope of cash to "last me a few days, if I need it". My mom is out of town on business for a few days, so I give her a call and she says we can crash there if we need to. I don't tell her why, just that I needed to be in the city

for a little bit.

On my way there, I call my uncle to talk to him about everything. I trust him more than anyone else, since my dad passed. He's excited that I called since we haven't spoken in a few weeks, and I can hear my aunt from the other end telling him to say hello to me for her. He tells me he's stepping outside so we can talk, and he asks what's wrong, he can tell I sound different. I begin to tell him about what happened, everything, but compressed so I don't overwhelm him. Once I finish and catch my breath, it's quiet for a solid minute. I ask him if he's still there, and he tells me, in a tone I've never heard from him before, that he has no idea what I'm talking about, not to ask him about it again, that he loves me, and he'll talk to me later.

That kind of upsets me that he reacted like that. Is he mad at me? Does he think I'm insane? Does he know something about all this? I don't want to call him back and bother him, so I guess I'll wait. I finally get to my mom's place, and I've been here for about four hours or so, researching everything I possibly can on all of this.

After some serious digging, I find that the sky thing that happened the first night has happened two other times in my town, one in '86 and one in '71. One was in broad daylight, and one was really similar to mine. Both people moved weeks after it happened and "refuse to talk about the occurrences that followed". One person is basically off the map completely, but I found a profile for the other one, so I'm trying to contact the. I'm also looking into the surrounding areas, but haven't found anything yet.

As for now, Gunner and I are safe. Scared and confused, but safe. When I have any more news, I'll let you know.

Part 5

UPDATE #4 09/04/2014 - I finally get a response from the profile I found of the person who experienced the sky in ’71. I had messaged her, privately, explaining what happened to me and how I found her name while researching similar occurrences. I left her my number, as well. I get a call a few hours later from a very upset-sounding woman (who sounded closer to my age) asking if this was some sort of sick joke.

I tell her I don’t understand what she means, and I ask if this is the same woman I messaged. She explains that I’m look for her mother, who was declared mentally insane in 1996 for talking about the same things I was trying to ask her about, but passed away three months ago. She tells me that she’s not sure if I’m crazy, too, or just plain rude, but she doesn’t want me to attempt to contact anyone in her family again. Back to square one.

I try calling my uncle a few times, but it rings once or twice and then goes to voicemail. He’s ignoring my calls and I don’t understand why. He’s the type of person whose phone can go off in the dead of night and he’ll still answer, no matter who is calling, because he always wants to make sure everyone is okay, and is willing to do anything he can to help anyone.

I call the cop to see if he can talk more, but he informs me he’s on duty and will call me in three-or-so hours. I haven’t gotten much sleep lately, and I feel like I’m going in circles with the research, so I decide to take a nap. I sprawl out on the couch, Gunner curled up at my feet, and browse through Netflix. Before I can even pick something, I pass out and end up sleeping much longer than planned. My body needed the rest.

I wake up to find everything as it should be- Gunner safely at my feet, the Netflix menu on the same page it was when I fell asleep, and my phone where I left it with a dying battery. I was hoping for a missed call from my uncle, or at least from the cop, but all I have is a text message from my mom asking how Gunner and I are doing, and a text message from the cop. Not an apology for not calling, not an explanation for all of this, just a man’s name that I’ve never heard of. I quickly reply with a question mark, but never receive a response. I plug in my phone and grab my laptop, and hesitantly search the name he gave me.

At first, nothing relevant comes up. Just a few social media profiles and a business ad or two. I visit the profiles, and the person in the picture looks vaguely familiar. Not familiar in a way that I know them, but familiar in that way when you’re out running errands, and the stranger you bumped into going into the post office is walking out of the grocery store when you’re walking in. That sort of familiar.

Then it clicks. I navigate back to the article I found, the one with the information of the two occurrences in my town. The man shown with the experience in ’86 looks just like the man I’m searching now, but older, of course. I message him with generally the same thing I messaged the other lady, excluding how I got his name. Not even twenty minutes later, my phone rings.

“How did you find me?” are the first words I hear. He doesn’t sound angry, just concerned. I briefly introduce myself, and tell him in better detail what happened, and I tell him about the cop. When I finish, he’s quiet, but I don’t want to push him. I hear him cuss under his breath, as if his worst fear was just confirmed. Then, all of a sudden, he tells me everything.

He had been driving home from the grocery store and started seeing veins that looked like both fire

and electricity, spreading through the afternoon sky, and then it, all at once, went completely black for what couldn't have been more than three minutes but felt like a lifetime. There was an unbelievably brilliant flash of light that lingered for a moment, making it impossible to see. When his vision finally cleared up, the sky was back to normal.

The events that followed were nothing short of bewildering, some even traumatizing. He goes into a post office one day, walks back out ten minutes later in a town he's never seen in his life. Not a different time frame in the same town, an entirely different town. He goes to work one Monday, the same job he's worked for twenty-five years, to find it's never existed.

He comes home one day to find his house completely on fire. He runs inside, knowing his little girl is in there, and when he gets through the door it's completely fine, as if there was never so much as a match flame. He wakes up in the middle of the night to see his wife lying in bed beside him, reading her favorite book, when she passed away two years prior. Three weeks later, he moves him and his daughter to another state, changes their names, and never experienced anything like it or even spoke of it again.

He warns me to be careful and to be safe, and wishes me the best. He never took the time to find out what really happened, and he never truly wanted to know. I'm glad he took the time to tell me his experiences, so I don't feel so crazy, but I had hoped he would have had more answers.

I continue researching anything I can, but don't find anything else that's helpful. Due to the extensive nap I took, I have a hard time sleeping, so I stay up late watching a movie to take my mind off things. It's almost midnight when I hear a 'ding' across the room- I forgot I left my phone charging. I check it to find a text from my uncle…

TEXT

When he and my dad were kids, they came up with a code so they could pass each other notes without their parents knowing what they were talking about. It was usually just about sports or silly things, and it was such a simple code, but it made them feel like secret agents. They taught me when I was younger, and they'd write out things for me to crack, funny jokes and things of that nature, just to entertain me. I have a feeling this isn't one of those fun jokes.

I print the text message so I can see it easier and highlight the numbers, and I make a page on my laptop to decipher it. It doesn't take me too long, and I'm looking for my mom's camera to take a picture of the text and the result (my phone is still doing that weird light streak sometimes and I don't feel like dealing with it) when Gunner jumps up and runs to the front door, barking, as if a mailman or a stranger was approaching.

Before I can even get to the door to check everything out, a thick envelope is slide under the door. I immediately check the locks to make sure they're secure, and then look through the peep-hole. Whoever delievered this must have left because all I see is an empty hallway, and Gunner is just sniffing the envelope, now.

It doesn't say anything on the front, no name or address, so I open it. It's nothing but a slip of paper with an address to a P.O. box, and a small gold key. I guess I know where I'm going first thing in the morning. I finally find my mom's camera so I can take the pictures of the message from my uncle (and now the key, too).

DECIPHERED

“HOME IS NOT SAFE ANYMORE / DO NOT GO BACK / WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE AND WILL HAPPEN AGAIN IS UNEXPLAINABLE / THERE IS A GLITCH IN THE SYSTEM IF YOU WILL / WHAT IS REALITY AND WHAT IS NOT WILL BEGIN TO COLLIDE / IF YOU WANT TO REMAIN IN REALITY YOU MUST HOLD ON TO IT / FIND YOUR ANCHOR AND DO NOT LET IT GO”

Part 6

FINAL UPDATE 09/05/2014 -

This, unfortunately, is my final update on this matter. For some of you, this may not be a satisfying answer, but after everything that has transpired, I've found closure with the situation, and I'm content with the resolution. I want to thank you, sincerely, for all of your condolences and concerns, and for staying with me through this. It's really meant a lot to me, and I'll always hold on to that.

I spend the next hour trying to call my uncle about the text he sent me, but he never answers. I text the cop, thanking him for the name, and asking if we can meet soon to discuss more. He responds saying he'll call me in the morning, but that's it.

I can't sleep, I can't even sit; all I can do is pace the floor, and it's making Gunner antsy. He's the type of dog who always has to sit on your toes when you're doing dishes or lean against your leg when you're talking to someone, so he doesn't know what to do since I haven't stood still in God knows how long.

I look up in the P.O. Box address listed on the slip, and find the post office is in the city I work in, the one on the other side of the country road from where I'm currently staying now, in my mom's apartment. My two options are to either take the highway, which is almost twice the drive, or risk going down the old country road, past our house. Not going at all is definitely not an option, because I'm desperate for answers, and I'm certain my mom wasn't expecting a late night package while she's out of town.

I figure it wouldn't do any harm to drive by and check on the house, as long as I don't stop or go in. I really miss being home, but I still don't understand what's going on or what the risks are, so I won't push it. At sunrise, I pack up our things, and Gunner and I hit the road. I get a coffee for myself and a treat for him; he deserves it all after this.

It's weird, driving the country road from this direction; it's been so long. I find some good music on the radio and roll the windows down a bit, trying to feel somewhat normal. Gunner tries to put his head out the window, but his big, floppy ears get caught in the wind and keep covering his eyes, so he gives up. I can't remember the last time I took him for a drive before everything happened, and make a mental note to give him more attention if we get through this.

Eventually, I roll up the windows and turn the air back on, because the sun is unbelievably bright today and it's ridiculously hot outside. We're coming close to passing the driveway, so I slow down a bit, debating whether or not to pull in. I slow to a stop in front of the drive to check the mail box, but it's nothing but junk mail and a few bills. I toss them in the back seat to sort later, and stare down the drive.

You can see the house from the road, but the driveway is three-quarters of a miles, so you can't really see all that well. I decide to turn in, just to check and make sure the house is alright. I swear to myself I won't get out of the car, that I won't even park- I'll just turn around and drive back out. Gunner gets excited because he knows we're home, but I don't let it get to me.

As I'm turning in, the station changes, but I just assume I accidentally hit the button on the steering wheel. I change it back and continue driving. As we get further down the drive, the radio turns to static, which is odd because I never lose signal on my driveway like that. I pull up in front of the

house, leaving enough room to turn around and drive back out. Everything looks normal, until I realize a window is broken. Not just one window, but all of them. I'd assume someone broke in, but it doesn't make sense for someone to break every window, including the ones upstairs.

I immediately throw my car in park and call the cop. He tells me he's on duty for twenty more minutes, but as soon as he's done he'll come check it out. Until then, he advises me to stay away. I pull back out of the drive, comforting Gunner for letting him down, and continue towards the post office. There's two in the city, always has been, but I've only ever been to one of them, and this isn't that one.

I roll the windows down a crack for Gunner and lock the car. I walk into a large room with shelves of boxes, envelopes, and stamps to purchase, and a counter with tellers to assist with mail. To the right, there's a wall of windows that shows a room full of P.O. Boxes, and a door that leads to them. I go through the door and am greeted by a kind woman at a small counter. She asks if I'm here to rent a new box or pick up mail from one. I tell her I'm just here to check mine, but she asks for my key.

I pull it out of the envelope, and she apologizes, informing me that those aren't the keys they use. Great. Now I have an address to a box and don't have a way in, and now I have a key with no clue what it unlocks. She stares at me, waiting for me to respond. I didn't expect someone to be monitoring the boxes, so I just up with something, and tell her my family rents a P.O. Box. I explain that they're out of town and left me in charge, but I lost the keys, found these, and thought they were it, but must be mistaken. She tells me it's totally fine, and asks for my ID so she can look it up by my last name. Yea, because that's going to work.

"Well, I guess they knew you'd lose the key, because they put it under your first and last name! That was easy." …excuse me? I've never been to this post office, let alone ever rented a P.O. Box, and now this lady is telling me that my lie checks out and I do, indeed, have a P.O. Box. She gets the spare key from the back office and helps me locate the box. I open it to find another envelope, this time addressed to me at this P.O. Box, with no return address.

I lock the box back and thank her for her time. I grab a bottled water from the vending machine on the way out, and put Gunner on his leash. We walk to the park across the street from the post office and find a bench in the shade. I tie his leash to the foot of the bench and fill his travel bowl with water, finishing off the bottle myself. I sit down and finally open the envelope to find a letter, one page full of handwriting that I'd recognize anywhere…

LETTER FRONT LETTER BACK

“if you are reading this, then it’s happening, and I’m not there to help you. My sweet daughter, I need you to read these words and remember them. You are not alone in this. This has happened before to many others, and it will happen again to people after you, but you will get through this. I raised you to be brave. You’re as brilliant as your mom and as stubborn as your old man. By now, you are probably seeing things that contradict your reality. Look past them. “The key to success isn’t just winning…it’s never quitting.” Don’t quit fighting, don’t run away. Even when they try to make you leave the home we built for you, stand your ground. Find your anchor, and do not let it go.

Love you forever, Dad

p.s.: if you’re given a small gold key, go into the work shed behind the house. Look for a small, metal box with a lock. If it’s where I left it, it’s on the top shelf behind a box of nails.”

“The key to success isn’t just winning… it’s never quitting.”

He used to tell me that when we'd watch football and his favorite team would be losing. He'd always say that it's not always about this big, glorious win, but that you tried your hardest and fought for what you wanted. That it's never a lose, but a lesson learned for the next time around. That if you give up, if you quit, if you run away you lose every time, but if you fight and still lose, and you get up and try again, that is the true success.

"Find your anchor…"

I here laughter, and look up to see Gunner playing with that same little girl that was in the other park that one day, but something is strange. Her brown, wavy hair and even deeper eyes… skin that just looks a tad bit sun kissed, but not too much… that blue and white dress, just like the one my mom bought me for my sixth birthday, when my dad spent the whole day calling me his little princess… This little girl in front of my is me, twenty years ago.

I sit, still as a statue, in awe of the sight in front of me. I want to watch it forever, but I become aware of the letter still in my hands, and realize what's going on. I quickly gather our things, untie Gunner's leash from the bench, and run towards the car. I toss everything in the back and secure him in the passenger seat, I still don't fully understand how all of this is possible, and maybe I never will. But I know what I need to do.

I make my way through the busy streets, heading towards the city limits. I see the police station down a side road, so I alter my route and pull in the lot, I see the cop I met at the gas station, the one who never called me back, standing outside his car talking on the phone. Gunner is happy to see him, but the feeling isn't mutual for me. I leave the car running and jump out, walk straight up to him and demand he tell me what he knows. He gives me a confused look and tells the person on the line that he'll call them right back. He asks me who I am and if he can help me...

What the hell are you talking about, who am I?! I remind him that we just spoke this morning and he was supposed to check on my house for me. I demand, again, that he tell me what he knows. He says he has no idea what I'm talking about or who I am, and the look on his face is making me believe him. Another cop comes out of the station and walks over to us. He kindly asks if there is something they can help me with. I explain to him that this cop had gone by my house to check on a "break in" and was supposed to give me an update on it, but now he's pretending he doesn't know me.

The gentleman explains to me that this is impossible, because the cop I'm referring to is a new transfer from out of town and has been doing ride-alongs all week with other officers, and they've been together all day. The cop insists he doesn't know me, and I'm starting to question if we ever really did talk. If I ever really did meet THIS cop.

Even more confused and more determined, I get back on the road with Gunner, going much faster than I probably should, heading for the one place everyone swears I shouldn't. If this thing, whatever this thing is, is going to make me crazy, or worse, kill me, going to eventually lill me, I'd like it to happen in the comfort of my own home. And if it's not, well, then what the hell am I so afraid of?

We drive down the old country road, the same one I'd driven for four years straight, the same one that all of a sudden decided to turn on me just a few days ago. This time, theres no sky-color change, no semi-trucks threatening my life, and the gas station is fully functioning again. But the things along the way get much worse. There's a wreck in the middle of the road- a three car pile-up, and one of them is very clearly my aunt's car. I can see the unicorn sticker that her younger daughter stuck on the door,

which they never bothered to scrape off. There is bloody glass everywhere, and everything in me begs to pull over and get them out, but I know I can't.

I keep driving, faster. There's a sweet little old couple who lives in a house tucked into this stretch of woods up on the left. I know them because they always gave us a Christmas card and a tin of holiday popcorn every year. As I pass, I can see a blazing flame making its way through the trees, inching closer to the house by the second. I remember the man I takes to, with his story about his house, and I keep driving.

I'm pulling into the drive and see a young Gunner who strayed too far from the front porch, running around in the road, crying for someone to help him find his way back. I hold back the tears and turn in the drive, talking to my Gunner, hoping my own voice will drown out the sound of his little whimpers. Halfway down I see my uncle, cousins, and thirteen-year-old me playing a crappy game of football in the yard, but I keep driving.

I pull past the house, ignoring the fact that I'm driving over shard of glass from the still-broken windows, park in front of the work shed, leash Gunner and get out. Realizing I don't know where the key is at that I don't have time to look for it, I grab the shovel leaning against the side and swing at the lock until it breaks. I bring Gunner inside and pull the door closed behind us, just as it starts to rain. I find the small step ladder and clim up to the top shelf, pushing aside the box of nails, revealing the small, metal box my dad described in the letter.

We go back to the car and I grab my bag, and we go in the house through the back door. The rain has quickly escalated into a storm, and I suddenly realize that it's freezing. I keep Gunner on the leash, and we make our way through the house. First the kitchen, then the dining room. I can hear the familiar sound of game film coming from the living room, but we continue. We're facing the back of the recliner, and I can see that dark-brown-with-a-hint-of-grey hair, and the hood of that old camp sweatshirt resting on his neck. I have a lump in my throat, and my stomach is in knots, but I can't stop now.

I walk past the recliner, looking away from it as best as I can, but I can feel Gunner pulling on the leash to get to him. I pull him tight, still adverting my eyes, and get us up the stairs and into my room. I lock the door behind us and close the curtain over the broken window, and I can hear the raging storm outside. My room looks like it did when I was a kid, not how it should now that I'm an adult. I throw my bag and Gunner's leash on the bed, grab the letter an the metal box, and close us in the closet. It's too dark to see anything, but I feel Gunner beside me, and wait for something, anything, to happen.

It seems like we're going backwards in time and hours have passed, all at once. I go to check the metal box for any answers, but I realize I left the key in my bag, so there goes that. The storm sounds like its in my ears, but I pull Gunner closer and wait. It sounds like a train is running through my house, and the walls begin to shake. A thin but brilliant light shines around the door, through the crack, and the sounds and vibrations get more intense. I curl up as tightly with Gunner as I can be, wondering if this is the last breath I'll take. Then, as quickly as it showed up, the light disappears, everything stops and everything goes silent. The warmth of the day comes back into my skin.

I let Gunner go, still scratching his back to let him know he's okay. I crawl to the door and open it just enough to see through. My room is back to normal. Everything is where I left it, and everything is how it should be. I slowly get up and walk out, waiting to find something wrong. With Gunner on my heel, I make my way to the window and pull back the curtain. I'm shocked by the sunlight that pours in, still

expecting it to be grey from the storm. I find my window to be whole again, without a single scratch. I scan the yard to find nothing but grass, fence, and trees. Nothing in the street as far as I can see, and everything looks normal. I slide to the floor, my back against the wall, looking at sweet Gunner, hoping to God that this is finished.

I wait, sitting there, expecting it all to come crashing back, for something in my reality to glitch, but it never does. The sun finally sets, naturally, normally, the way it's meant to. Gunner jumps on the bead, knocking my bag off and spilling all its contents. The sunlight reflects off the little gold key, drawing my attention to it, and I remember the box. I grab them both and sit on the bed beside Gunner, nervous to see what's inside. I open it to find one single picture.

I remember this picture, one my dad took of me, asleep on the couch, with Gunner snuggling up to me. It was in the first few weeks of Gunner being with my dad, and I was helping house-train him and everything. He always said it was one of his favorite memories, because it's one of the only times he remembers that Gunner actually wanted me over him.

I'm flooded with emotion… happiness, remembering those good times, remembering my dad and his love for us… confusion about everything… heartache from missing him… As I wipe the tears streaming down my face, the picturefalls from my hand, face down in the box, and in that same, all too familiar handwriting, are two simple words.

"My anchors."

Pete the Moonshiner

by OvenFriend

First Runner Up - September Monthly Contest

In the fourth and fifth grade, I used to spend the night at my friend Tom's house almost every weekend. Tom lived in a run-down farm house in the country. He shared a room with his older brother, Walter. The three of us would stay up late telling scary stories.

The scariest was a true story. Here is how Walter told it:

-0000-

Back in the 1920s, this house was owned by a different family. Their closest neighbor was an inbred moonshiner named Pete. Pete lived in a shack deep in the woods and was frequently in trouble with the law. The parents warned the little boy and girl who lived here NEVER to go near Pete's land.

The young boy lived in this very room. One night, the he was awakened by the sound of shattered glass somewhere inside the house. Living so close to Pete, the boy was very cautious. And instead of opening the door, he locked it. He pressed his ear to the door and listened.

The boy heard bootsteps stumbling down the hallway that were much too heavy to be his father's. He could almost smell moonshine through the bedroom door. "Let me in, boy." It was Pete... But the boy wouldn't unlock the door. Overcoming his fear, he shouted "No!"

After a minute, the boy could hear Pete's heavy boots fading back through the house. In a distant room, he heard his father shouting at Pete. But the shouts soon turned to screams. For almost an hour, the sounds degenerated as the father shred his vocal chords to ribbons while screaming. The boy thought the pleading in hoarse agony was worst thing he had ever heard until it was replaced by something worse. Silence.

Pete's boot steps lumbered back through the house to the boy's room. He pounded on the solid oak door. "Boy! Open up this door or you'll regret it." The boy could smell the moonshine through the door. Again he said "No!"

And so it was his mother's turn. Her shouts and screams lasted for two hours. When they stopped, the heavy boots stumbled back to his door. The stink of moonshine was overwhelming. "Boy! I said 'Open up this door.' This is your last chance." The boy was terrified, "Please don't hurt my sister!" Pete was drunk and enjoying himself. He chuckled, "Then open up, boy." But the boy knew better. And so he spent the next three hours listening to the screams of his younger sister.

When the police came to investigate the house two days later, they found the mom, dad, and sister tied spread-eagle to their beds. Pete had cut a small hole in each of their lower abdomens and pulled the bowels out of their belly inch by inch as they died in pain.

They found the boy dehydrated but alive. He was still locked in THIS very room. Pressed against this very door. He was completely catatonic. He spent the rest of his life in a sanitarium, occasionally mumbling "should I have opened the door?... should I have opened the door?...."

Pete was eventually caught and executed. His shack was torn down. But his ghost still haunts this house. Sometimes, we can smell a hint of sweet moonshine in the morning, and a pain in our bellies. And when we do, we know Pete was here during the night, trying to pull out our insides.

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This story really creeped me out. Like 10 out of 10! I always insisted that the three of us sleep with the bedroom door locked and the lights on. Your imagination is so strong at that age! I was terrified of every noise in the house before finally falling asleep. Whenever I woke at their house, I could even smell the faint, sweet aroma of Pete's moonshine. To be honest, I could usually feel a pain in my lower belly.

Whenever I told the two brothers about it, they would giggle and play along. "Yeah, I smell it too" said Walter. "Me too. And my stomach hurts!" chimed in Tom, pretending to be scared. They moved to Utah when Tom and I were in the fifth grade. I haven't seen them since.

Flash forward to this morning. I'm sitting in chemistry lab on campus. As we were setting up the experiment, one of the chemicals smelled exactly the same as my memory of Pete's moonshine. It's an incredibly distinct, penetrating, almost sweet scent - not exactly like hard alcohol or real moonshine, but similar.

I had not smelled it since those mornings after sleeping over with Tom and Walter. This was the exact same smell. I picked up the bottle and looked at the label: “diethyl ether.” It was ether.

I stared across the lab in a daze. Frozen. I remembered locking the door of their bedroom every night. I thought about waking with the faint smell of ether in my mouth. I remembered the distinct pain in my bowels each morning.

And I realized... There was no "Pete the Moonshiner."

They had been raping me.

What Did This?

by Grindhorse

Second Runner Up - September Monthly Contest

Doorbells are not inherently scary. The doorbell rings; the door is answered. Of course, what's on the other side of the door can change the interaction significantly.

I'm a house painter by trade. Generally, I work by myself or with Joe, a middle-aged, silent type. He's a nice guy, a talented painter, and a devout Christian. It's funny to think his faith actually has little to do with what happened that day.

It was a Wednesday afternoon. The entire day was spent hanging drywall, completely covering the ceilings of two bedrooms. If you've ever covered a ceiling in drywall, we can swap stories of shoulder pain and screw shards in our fingers later.

Two women lived in the house, with its cracking walls, dusty everything, and strange ability to cast shadows in a room facing direct sunlight. Somewhat elderly women. Sisters, I think; I wasn't too sure. Kind women, but they had a tendency to walk completely in sync with one another. It was like, if you've ever seen the movie Don't Look Now, it reminded me of the old women in that. Man, that was a pretty good movie; it used suspense effectively, but after a while the lack of anything happening became a bit mundane.

Oh, sorry, I'm rambling. I daydream when I work, so documenting the day brings out the talker in me. But, anyway, the women had left for several hours. No idea where they went, but judging by the empty Lorezapam bottles and compulsive conversations about death on the news, I'd say nowhere important. Just getting away from the loneliness and depression that is the Philadelphia suburbs for a while.

So, it was myself, Joe, and a dying radio set to the oldies. The radio would turn to static whenever I walked by. Only me, which I found odd. I joked in my head about possibly being a demon. These are the things one thinks about while screwgunning a 400th spiral into gypsum. Spiral Into Gypsum would actually be a decent band name, honestly. There I go, rambling again. The stories never stop aboard this train of thought...

The doorbell rang.

Joe called from the other room, “Hey, Dave, mind grabbing that? My hands are full.”

“Should we really be answering the door with the homeowners gone?”

“Well...no, I suppose whoever it is can always come back.” Silence. “Come help me dry fit this.”

I sigh, knowing soon I'll be holding my arms above my head for a lot longer than I'd want.

One hour passes, and the women haven't come home. We've exhausted our drywall surplus upstairs, so Joe charges me to run downstairs to grab another sheet myself. Maneuvering a cumbersome piece of Sheetrock is not something I'm excited about, but the sooner we finish, the sooner I can kill all the ice cream in my freezer. Since I'm basically a child. Fuckin' sue me.

Charging down the stairs, I stop. The front door is covered by a thin curtain, obscuring the window in it somewhat, but the sunlight pouring through outlines a silhouette on the other side of the door. I cock an eyebrow, as if anybody can see my confusion. Whoever happened to be standing there was completely still, so I decided to assume it was one of the women on their porch admiring the bland

street corner. It's funny how we instantly rationalize what we don't understand. It isn't so much that we make sense of the world, but we invent our own reality where nothing bad can happen.

My hand gripped the tarnished handle and turned, pulling the door open to reveal a man in a black suit that would be in style 200 years prior to that moment. He was wearing a bowler hat and looked vaguely similar to an elderly Sinatra. His voice, however, was not from The Chairman: deep and leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Hello friend, I started to think you would never answer the door.”

It was at this point I should've closed the door in his face, but frankly I don't think it would've changed the events that followed.

“I...didn't know you were there this whole time. You a friend of Maureen's?” He had to know the homeowners somehow, right? Right. Breathe and remember: rationalize.

“No, I'm just here to deliver an envelope to a...Joe Hause? Is that what that says?” The man pulled some reading glasses from his pocket. “Yes, Joe Hause. Do you happen to be Joe?”

“No, I'm not Joe, but I could take this to him if you'd like. He's right upstairs...”

“I can't allow you to touch this envelope, but if you would allow me to come in, I'd be more than happy to deliver the envelope and be on my way.”

I heard steps behind me. I was wondering when Joe would get impatient.

“Dave, where's the drywa- who's that?”

“I'm not important, but this envelope is for Joe Hause. Would you be Joe Hause?” The old man was exceedingly pleasant, cracking a smile without a hint of malice.

“I am...” Joe approached the man as one would approach a leper. He snatched the off-white envelope, opening it at arms length. “If this is anthrax, I'm making sure you die with me, old man.” Joe was also a conspiracy theorist.

The man just grinned. “It's nothing of the sort, but I appreciate the humor.”

Joe removed a single piece of paper from the envelope, reading it aloud, brutally grimacing.

“It isn't solar storms. It isn't demons. It isn't nuclear.” Pause. “Then what the fuck is it?”

“I just deliver the messages.” The old man gave a stiff wave before collapsing into a pathetic heap.

The police arrived promptly, pulling up in a storm of light and sound. They took statements from each of us, surveyed the area; the homeowners came back, obviously horrified an old man died on their porch. This was made more bizarre by the women asserting that they had never before seen the unfortunate visitor.

The old man was a complete stranger to everyone, apparently. He had nothing in his pockets. No tags on his clothing. No fingerprints. His teeth were dentures with no label or serial number branded onto them. The cops fidgeted for a while, taking pictures, shooting their guns at each other in a weird take on a water gun fight, punching stray animals. We all joined in, and it was a great time. I'm kidding, but the officers really didn't know what to do, so naturally they told us to call them if anything else happened. They were gone.

Maureen's supposed sister had gone upstairs to lie down. Joe, myself, and Maureen made awkward small talk, having no stake in this old man and wanting to banish the ordeal from memory. Joe made

no mention of the envelope to the police or to the sisters.

Eventually, we all decided the best course of action was for Joe and I to go ahead and continue working. I wish we left.

I was working in the front bedroom, so I pushed the door open, not remembering having closed it, but telling myself I'm forgetful sometimes. There was Maureen's sister Diana, lying dead on the floor, eyes wide, chest and stomach sliced open revealing a bloodless cavity. Her arm was propped up with a wooden board, forcing it to point directly at the ceiling. One of the pieces of drywall had a new arrangement of nails. The black heads all gathered in a pentagram; it appeared to be bleeding, red fluid dripping from the old nail holes.

I guess I should mention the rest of the room. Diana wasn't the only dead body. One of the police officers and two people I had never seen before all lay dead and empty, pointing up to the ceiling. The furniture, which only consisted of a bed and a desk, were covered in sheets. Joe's tools, two different-sized pliers, a drywall saw, a drill, and a painter's putty knife sat neatly on top of the desk. The bed was covered in envelopes.

It may have been a gut reaction to the scene, but Joe ran frantically to the envelopes, tearing each one open like a spoiled kid on Christmas: “it isn't Satan. It isn't monsters. It isn't demons. It isn't a serial killer. It isn't aliens.” The envelopes all contained variations of the trope, gradually turning Joe's tone from urgent to pleading.

He collapsed into tears. My heart was racing, but until you've seen something atrocious, you don't know how you would react. Maureen vomited before passing out on the floor. I stood still, sweating, wringing my hands. The vice grip in my chest signaled a panic attack. What do I do now? What did this?

Then Joe opened the last envelope. This one was completely black, buried beneath the others. Unlike the previous letters, this was opened with care. The vigor was gone.

Joe stood still for a while before turning to look out the window. Where I was situated at the door, I couldn't see what he was looking at, but I didn't need to see it.

“GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE NOW.” Joe turned to me in a frenzy, running towards the door as I heard shattering glass. I glanced back as I flew down the stairs only to see Joe clawing at the hardwood floor, nails tearing off into cascading blood. He was being dragged by a scabbed hand with long, yellowing nails. I didn't see what the hand belonged to, but it didn't matter. I thought of going back to save Maureen, but as I plowed through the front door, her body exploded from the window above me. The sound of bones cracking and ripping accompanied the unnatural bounce of the corpse.

“Run little rabbit. It's hunting season.” Monotonous tone. Sour taste in my mouth. The taste of garbage and hate. Not my own hate.

I threw open my car door, remembering suddenly that my battery had been temperamental lately.

One turn of the key. Grinding sounds.

Two turns of the key. Grinding sounds.

Three turns of the key. No sounds.

I looked up at the second floor window, feeling eyes on me. Being parked across the street, the view of the window was clear enough to make out an abnormally large head, given that appearance by a

mass of matted, straw-like black hair. The hair obscured all facial features except the scarred, dirty cheeks and jaw, adorned with...well, it wasn't a smile...the mouth was open displaying gritted, caramel teeth, but the expression didn't indicate any emotions.

Four turns. The windowgazer slithered from the window, limbs being used in the wrong way to exit onto the overhang above the front door.

Five turns. The windowgazer reached a scabbed hand onto the drainpipe, attempting to slide down the pipe upside-down. The nails and brackets on the tube tore flesh from the thing, dripping blood onto the pavement in a sinister shower.

Six turns. The thing lay still on the ground for several seconds before wildly flailing its bony body parts, the whole time seemingly training that eyeless gaze on me. Mouth still open. Teeth still gritted. Blood still leaking from fresh wounds.

Seven turns. Lucky seven, the car came to life, turning the corner, and I was gone...right into traffic.

“Fuck...fuck, fuck, fuck.” Cars in front, cars behind. I glanced behind me, expecting to see the beast wandering towards the main road. Instead I saw Maureen and Diana pull their car around the block.

My phone buzzed. It was Joe. “He...hello?”

“Where the fuck are you, man?”

“I...you...you're okay?”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You ran to your car in a panic. I'm concerned for YOU...”

I pulled the car to the side of the road, staring at my hands for no reason other than that they existed. The phone was still on; Joe asked if I was there, but I couldn't bring myself to answer. Was it really Joe? I decided to ask him one thing.

“What did it say in the last envelope?”

Static for a second, then a sour taste in my mouth. I knew I wasn't going back to that house.

“It's curiosity.”

There's Something in the Ladies' Room at Work

by gypster85

Third (Tied) Runner Up - September Monthly Contest

For the past four years, I've worked as a video editor at a woman's apparel company. As you might imagine, most of the employees are female, and I'm in fact the only guy in my department. This leads to a lot of jokes and harmless teasing from both friends and co-workers, but the truth is that I don't mind at all; I hardly even notice. There is, however, one downside. The bathroom situation. But, I'm getting slightly ahead of myself.

A few months ago, due to lack of space, my employer moved my entire department (there are about 12 of us, 11 girls and me the one dude) from its main headquarters to a smaller building across the street. It was a perfect situation; we desperately needed the extra space and the building was available. Unfortunately, it wasn't in great shape. No one had leased the building for quite a while, and it was obvious. Ceiling tiles were cracked or collapsing, the carpets had peeled up revealing bare concrete underneath, and the bathrooms were in god-awful shape. Honestly, the space looked more like a home for squatters than a comfortable workspace. But my employer put a lot of money into remodeling and by the end, it was unrecognizable.

What an amazing transformation. We each had individual working spaces complete with potted plants, ergonomic chairs, and open spaces to decorate however we wished. We were given a full kitchen complete with a Kroger coffee maker, Magic Bullet juicer, and top of the line water purifier. And the girls were given an extravagant bathroom complete with futons and makeup mirrors. (You know, the kind with bulbs around the frame?) But there was one cost-cutting measure the company implemented. And they did it in the one place where it would affect the least amount of employees: the men's room.

The men's room was a single toilet, sink, and plain mirror. That was fine, seeing as I would be the only one using it, aside from the occasional office visitor. But the problem was that the door had a loose lock. Sometimes when I exited the bathroom, the weighted door would shut on its own and randomly engage its mechanism, locking me out until someone from maintenance could come over and jimmy the door back open. It didn't happen that often, but it was often enough to be a huge pain. To make matters worse, sometimes maintenance was bombarded with other matters, leaving me without a bathroom for hours or even days. Luckily, my female co-workers were good-natured enough to let me use the ladies' room if I were ever in the unfortunate situation of having to go badly while locked out of the men's room. They said they didn't mind; if anything they found it amusing.

On the handful of times it happened, I would play it off light-heartedly, though really I hated it. And it wasn't just because of my male ego. It wasn't due to indignity or embarrassment. It was because using the ladies' room just felt weird. Like, weird in a creepy way that I can't really explain. As if when I was in there, I wasn't alone.

I vividly remember the first time I ever had to resort to using it. It was on one of the days where the men's room lock had jammed that morning, and I had gone nearly a whole day without another bathroom break. An hour before my shift ended, I felt like my bladder was about to burst. My leg was shaking, my teeth were biting the inside of my cheeks, and my eyes were beginning to water. I realized at that point that my options were to either use the ladies' room or find a bush outside. I opted to use

the ladies' room, though it was actually a tough decision. My female co-workers promised they would guard the door to make sure no one went in while I used the restroom. They checked to make sure it was empty before I shamefully entered.

"Hello?" I said. No response.

My first thought was how nice it looked. Like I said up above, futons and lit mirrors! I was also surprised that there were no urinals. Only stalls. I know that sounds completely crazy, but when you've gone your whole life seeing urinals on the walls of public bathrooms, you do a double take when you realize they aren't there.

I entered a stall, locked it (though I was sure no one else would be coming in), and undid my fly. I stood there in heaven as I emptied my bladder, immediately hearing nothing but the sound of rushing pee. The sound continued for what damn near felt like a minute straight before I heard something else. It was the sound of light footsteps. Then,

"Squeak."

My heart stopped. It was the sound of a nearby stall opening. Someone else was in the bathroom with me. Either they had come in unbeknownst to myself and my co-workers, or they had been there all along and hadn't answered when I called out. After the immediate shock, my feeling was that of utter embarrassment. Here I was, standing in the ladies room, unleashing a floodgate of piss, and some poor girl had to hear it. Some girl I worked with, and who was probably just as embarrassed as I was. Damn, this was awkward.

Somehow, without even thinking, I let out a feeble, "Uhh, sorry." I again heard the squeak of a bathroom stall followed by a light thud. I finished peeing, shook twice for good measure, and sighed deeply as I exited the stall. I saw my beet red face in the light of the mirror as I quickly washed my hands and exited the restroom.

My co-workers swore that no one had entered the ladies room while I was inside. And they assured me it had been empty when I went in. I wasn't sure, but I chalked it up to me hearing things, perhaps water running through pipes in the wall, and had forgotten about the whole experience shortly thereafter.

I only had to ever resort to using the ladies room once or twice in the months that followed, and each time was a miserable experience. Each time I was on edge, always paranoid, always feeling as though I was invading someone's space. Once, while washing my hands in the sink, I looked up at the mirror and swore I saw movement in the corner of my eye. A quick motion near one of the stall doors. Like someone (or something?) quickly ducking out of sight? I couldn't pinpoint where the motion had come from, exactly, but I swore at the moment I saw it, I heard that unmistakable sound.

"Squeak."

Followed by a light thud.

No wonder women go to the restroom together, I thought. It must help block out all the weird sounds.

All in all, using the ladies restroom was an at-best awkward experience. But it wasn't too terrible. Until today. Shit. I seriously just got a cold chill up my spine thinking about it. Today was the last day that I will ever, EVER use the ladies' restroom. And I'll make sure none of my co-workers else ever uses it again either, if I can help it.

It had been a normal day if not hectic day. So much to do. A late lunch which I worked most of my way through. (I didn't eat that much as my stomach had been feeling funny all day.) I had a million upcoming deadlines to think about as I left the men's restroom around noonish. It shut. It latched. I sighed, turned around, checked the handle, and wasn't that surprised to learn I had just locked myself out. I sent an e-mail to maintenance and went on with the rest of my day, not thinking much about it.

I soon realized that there was no way I'd make it home on time, especially when a last minute project popped up an hour before I was supposed to leave. I felt a slight worry in my system. First, if I got home late I may not be able to find a parking spot on my block. Second, I was dealing with quite a bit of indigestion and was feeling quite uncomfortable. But I worked as quickly as I could, hoping I could get out in time.

Of course, the days you want to get home early are the days you end up working the latest. Sure enough, by 6pm, the last girl had left the office and I wasn't nearly finished with my project. By 7:30pm, my stomach was killing me. It began to loudly rumble. And it wasn't an, "I'm hungry," rumble, but rather, an "I'm upset and bloated and you are about to have a mess," rumble. Sparing you too many details, let's just say I needed to use the restroom, and use it badly.

I looked at how much longer it would take my computer to finish processing my video project. 45 minutes. That plus the half hour drive home meant there was no way I could wait. I went to the men's room and tried to open it.

"Click."

Oh, right. It was still locked and maintenance had been too busy to fix it. I looked at the ladies room and felt a twinge of nervousness for some weird reason, but shook it off and decided to head on in. (Though the way my stomach was acting, I didn't really have a choice.)

I entered the ladies room and quickly rushed to a stall, unbuckling my belt as I walked. Again, I'll try sparing you the details. But within 20 seconds of sitting down, I felt a twinge of horror. I began to hear footsteps. I listened closely, wondering if I was again imagining things.

"Thumpthumpthump...."

No, it was unmistakable. I was definitely hearing a walking sound. Wait, not a walking sound. A crawling sound? My heart skipped a beat and my lungs turned to iron as I realized where the sound was coming from. It was coming from above me. Directly above me.

I looked up and the sound disappeared. For a moment, I heard nothing but the heavy ache of my own racing heartbeat. Then,

"Squeak."

It was at that moment, I realized I wasn't hearing a stall opening. It was the sound of a ceiling tile lifting. As the tile directly above me slid open, ever so slightly, I know I saw it. My eyes widened and my mouth dropped open as I stared at something that was staring back at me.

Inside the ceiling, partially hidden in shadow, I saw an eye. Peeping around, staring right at me for a single instant. Then, as quickly as it was there, it was gone. The last thing I remember hearing was the light thud of a ceiling tile dropping into place.

What happened next is a complete blur. I don't remember standing or even pulling up my pants. I don't remember grabbing my keys nor exiting the building. I just remember the pounding in my chest, a

pounding so hard that my ribs ached, as I drove home, replaying the events in my head. I wondered how the hell I was going to tell my all-but-one female department what I saw.

It was a man's face. But not entirely human.

My Baby Monitor Got Hacked

by mchrisbenner

Third (Tied) Runner Up - September Monthly Contest

Part 1

JUNE, 1985

As a child, there was a period when I would tell my mother Queen Persephony was talking to me on the upstairs baby monitor. My mother nodded as mothers do to nonsense, attributing it to my vivid imagination.

Then came a day when she heard me talking to myself in my bedroom.

“Why’s outside?” she heard me asking.

(As I was no older than 5, Why was a word I would use for all my questions as a child, such as Why’s time is it?or Why’s Scaredy? forWhere is Scaredy?, our old dog.)

The question caught her attention and she cracked the door to check on me, mainly concerned that I might be messing with my bedroom window. She peered in and, as she suspected, found me leaning up against my (second floor) bedroom window, looking down—when to her absolute horror, a high-pitched voice answered.

“To take you home, angel."

It came through the baby monitor.

She approached me in a hazy sort of shock, too frightened to run or understand what was happening, and walked up behind me—

A blood curdling scream escaped her lips.

I was at the window because I was looking down at a person in our back yard, an adult in a black, full-body overcoat. Their face was covered in a tan, bird-like mask and dark-brim hat.

The person waved their gloved hand up at my mother and ambled off.

The police arrived soon after.

Someone had modified the upstairs baby monitor to send and receive specific radio signals, much like a walkie-talkie…which meant that, in order to do this, someone had been inside the house, up the stairs, and inside my bedroom.

The police found a mask hanging on a nearby sign post, as if on display. It was vintage, a mask modeled on the plague doctors from the fourteenth century, and from the mask they recovered hair, which was later identified as male facial hairs (and would become important much later).

The local officer confided in us that cases like this were appearing elsewhere in Southern Pennsylvania. Only recently had the county departments begun communicating with one another, realizing that each case was linked.

Once I had talked to the detective in charge and everyone left, my mom asked me what the stranger had wanted. I had been afraid to say anything earlier because I was young and embarrassed and I

thought everyone would laugh, but I finally told her…
“Queen Persephony collects angels.”

Part 2

JULY, 1985

The Tampa police received a call from a local hardware store…

A blender had been returned for a refund. The customer had claimed it was broken so, after they left, the store clerk inspected it to find the problem:

The blade motor was jammed…with hair.

Believing that the hair was human, the clerk turned the blender and motor and hair over to the authorities, who quickly established that it wasn't human but animal hair.

Still concerned the possibility that someone was blending up animals, the police decided to pay the unsatisfied customer a visit. Tracking him down proved difficult – he had walked to and from the store – but they hit a bit of luck while checking video surveillance from the local convenience stores and the clerk at a nearby gas station knew the odd young man (as he had come in there often over the last few days), as well as the fact that he was staying across the street in one of the apartments.

"That young man's apartment easily tops the list of worst things I've ever seen in my life," Police Chief Hal Offanhitter would later tell reporters during a press conference in front of the station. "It was worse than a nightmare because nightmares don't stink that bad."

The question was J.F. Daley, an autistic 25 year old. Described as an average white male, his neighbors said he first appeared one week earlier, that one day he was just there, in J5. They assumed he was taking care of the elderly woman who had been living there before his arrival, even claiming that he was her nephew to one resident. There was one incident the day before the police arrived: it had been an especially hot July day when one of the neighbors noticed a stench and complained to the landlord; the out-of-town landlord called J5 and spoke to the young man, who said the issue would be cleared up immediately, blaming the poor ventilation and his aunt's deteriorated health. Everyone that had spoken to him said he was quiet and polite but odd, socially awkward – like he didn't know how to talk to people.

The police located the apartment but, in order to get in, the fire department had to bust down the door; then provide the police with oxygen tanks and masks so they could enter the premises safely, as the rot had grown so overwhelming that it was suffocating to everyone but the young man, apparently.

All of the windows had been entirely taped over with newspaper so they searched with flashlights.

The corpse of the elderly woman was in the bathtub, a mess of rotten flesh and organs. Her face had been smashed open. Pieces of her had been scattered around the house, including hunks of meat the young man had sawed off her body and stored in the refrigerator for later consumption. Also in the fridge were several dead animals, several local pets, wild animals, and road kill.

They found J.F. Daley naked in the bedroom, covered in blood and mucus and pus, scrawling senseless words and phrases on the bare walls like:

human eat human well you see miss life

and one name, repeatedly…

QUEEN PERSPHONY

His diet had consisted mainly of human skin and brain, though he was using a new, high-powered

blender to mix Coca Cola (from the gas station) with animal carcasses.

"Most troubling," Chief Offanhitter announced at the press conference, "is that we currently believe this disturbed young man has information that could lead to the man or men involved in a recent string of child disappearances in the northeast, information that could possibly save lives."

Except there was an issue…

Unlike most criminal interrogations, once they had the young man in custody (keeping him confined between an interrogation room and a Tampa holding cell), J.F. Daley lost all inhibition and shyness and began talking at great length. His confessions took no encouragement, each given with a rare eloquence, as he was very well-spoken. Over time, the stories became lengthier and more intricately detailed as J.F. Daley would nonchalantly pick the scabs on his acne-riddled face while describing murder after murder, rattling off name after name and place after place.

The issue was that they were partially true.

J.F. Daley only had a history to the age of 14, from what they could tell, so he had no adult history and it was possible that he could have lived in each of the areas he described…except, with only a little bit of research, it was obvious that most of the crimes couldn't have belonged to him. Some of the crimes were committed by other people, people that had already been charged with the crime and sentenced to prison. There were even murders that happened when he was a young child, things he was physically incapable of committing.

But in every confession, J.F. Daley would list details that only someone intimately involved would know. Murder weapon. Method of disposal. Location. Souvenirs. And every so often he'd mention the name and location of a crime that hadn't been solved, or the location of a body that had no record, either because it had never been found or because it didn't exist.

This led to a long list of questions: How does he know the details? Where the crimes wrongfully charged? Were others with him? And every confession only led to more questions, like the rant where he rattled off the names of the missing children in Southern Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware.

The police had no idea what they'd uncovered, no idea that this disturbed young man was actually revealing to them a massive piece of evidence not just about the missing children but about dozens of crimes across the U.S.

First, their task was to wade through facts and facts, detail upon detail, differentiating the bullshit from the possible.

Here's an excerpt from one his many confessions:

"I accidentally slept with a dead body once in '74, when I was 28" (he was 13 in 1974) "and still a virgin, shortly after I got into a frat," (he had never been in a frat; in fact, he had never been to college) "my brothers decided to surprise me for my twenty-second birthday by hiring a prostitute so they went into the city and found a young street girl in South and they paid her to come back for the night. I was in class all day (it was actually the day before my birthday) and they stayed home and set up the house for a party and one of the brothers' got a boatload of cocaine from his father's friend and they got a keg and weed and hard liquor, pretty standard for our parties back then."

With some confessions, his voice and mannerisms seemed to change. He sat differently. His diction was different. The glaze in his eyes faded, replaced with focus, determination; sometimes playful or mischievous, as if he embodied someone else.

“I finished classes and returned home to find that they had set up a surprise party and all our friends were over, music blaring, everyone drinking. They got me drunk - very drunk, very quickly. And then they told me that there was a prostitute naked in my bed, waiting for me. I entered my bedroom and there she was, a young naked girl lying on top of my blankets, snorting coke off my bedside table and drinking Jack. I was very nervous and drunk and she calmed me down and made me feel better. She suggested we turn out the lights so I could quietly undress and then she would take care of it from there, which she did, directing me into her for a quick orgasm.”

He laughed as if this were some humorous anecdote he was sharing at a cocktail party.

“Afterward we turned the lights back on and lay in bed snorting coke and drinking for a bit before I got uncomfortable and turned the lights back out. I hadn't expected to sleep because of the cocaine but waited until I again found stamina and again got on top of her. This time she didn't direct me, which I thought was normal. She laid still and let me have sex with her. She made a gurgling sound that I thought was an orgasm and I went down on her, back up, flipped her over, harder and faster until I orgasmed inside her harder than I ever have.”

He chuckled.

“When I was done I went back to the party to brag about losing my virginity and continue drinking and I passed out on a couch in the living room assuming that the prostitute had been worn out and that she was sleeping in my bed. The frat boys must have thought the same as the autopsy found traces of semen from seven different men (post mortem) along with the toxicology report stating the sixteen year old girl had died of a massive cocaine overdose.”

He licked his lips, a fire in his eyes.

“A lot of us were expelled but I don't think it had the same effect on the others, not the actual event. Most were upset and the entire thing was awful but she had died while I was inside her - I felt it. It was…amazing, very much like the first snow in winter, when the ground is untouched and pure and beautiful. Her skin had a shallow warmth that slowly faded until it was cold and almost wet. Her body - so unnaturally still, stiff - just letting me touch it, kiss it, love it as a body and not a soul, no beating heart, no further words. I'll just say this:

Never again did I sleep with a dead body on accident.”

It took a short time for the police to locate the origin of this particular confession since J.F. Daley had recited it verbatim, including each mannerism and fiery glance…

It was the recorded confession of a death row inmate in Arkansas.

Part 3

There is a rare condition called psychosomatic recall; or, to the laymen, a photographic memory during instances where the senses are most peaked or stressed. It's an uncommon conditioning of the brain, of caused by extreme trauma, and certainly contributed to the peculiar behavior of murderer J.F. Daley. He seemed less of an individual and instead an amalgamation of extreme occurrences.

There was one person, though, one person he spoke of fondly, someone that must have been with him, someone that he drew obsessively while in custody...

"If she had the means of doing so," J.F. Daley had said, beaming proudly, "she would kill masses of people — bring about catastrophes."

In their desperation for answers, the police brought in a psychologist. His diagnosis was that J.F. Daley had had a psychological break somewhere along the way and that there was no longer a difference between his cognizant self and his vivid, photo-realistic memory. The young man was no longer a sentient person but instead an amalgamation of every crime he had ever witnessed, which included crimes that had been relayed to him over the years.

A one-track mind of gruesome details.

The police were baffled how he could survive so long on his own, how law enforcement or local mental health facilities hadn't become aware of him over the years. There was literally no record of him from age 14 to 24, though there was plenty known about him before that. It seemed his true manner started showing itself when he was a teen, culminating with a crime the Texas Journalheadlines labeled "The Trailer Park Massacre"...

JUNE, 1974

It happened in the back-end of a trailer park in northern Texas.

J.F. Daley was about thirteen years old, an average-looking, bleach blonde, blue-eyed boy. Little is known about the family aside from the horrid facts of the case. His father usually wore a white shirt and jeans, his hair moderately unkempt, skinny frame, stern demeanor. His mother was in her early thirties and had a quaint appearance, often quiet.

They lived at the end of a cul-de-sac with three other trailers and, though none of them were particularly close, they would all gather together for a block party every Friday evening. One of the residents brewed their own beer while another would play music, and the Daley father always cooked up the best BBQ. The adults would drink and socialize. The kids would run around playing, all of them except "the Daley kid" since he was shy and older than the others, spending his time alone behind the trailers.

Then one day the police were brought to the Daley house. The local children had been playing behind the trailers, where the Daley kid usually spent his time, and it was there that they found a mass grave of local pets and wild animals, even road kill – each carcass skinned and mutilated, some of them chewed raw.

A neighbor later confessed that he had once seen the Daley kid "lure a puppy into a potato sack" but that he had thought the boy was playing. (It is believed that the boy would catch wild animals by filling a sack with meat and then closing the bag whenever an animal climbed in; then he would swing the sack against trees and buildings as hard as he could until the animals were dead.)

The police were speaking with his parents about charging the boy with animal cruelty when an officer excused himself to the bathroom…and that's when he caught a whiff of something horrible, one that was a specific scent:

The acrid stench of rotting.

Assuming more local pets had been hidden under the trailer, the officers examined the crawl space and found something much larger...

A human body.

Back-up was immediately brought in, even the FBI.

All of the neighborhood families were questioned. They spoke of him in the same vein as they would his entire life, calling him "shy" and "polite" but "socially awkward".

The body discovered under the trailer belonged to a young girl that had been missing for weeks. The family had assumed she ran off. Her body was wrapped for preservation but the wrapping had cracked, leading to the stench beneath the bathroom.

The police began searched the house and immediately found human remains, including traces of bodies that weren't located or identified, bodies that had been disposed of elsewhere.

And they found several pounds worth of human meat in the fridge, which led to the realization that it wasn't just the Daley kid…

It was the whole family.

They were cannibals.

During the only confession he gave to the police that actually involved himself, J.F. Daley said, in a shy, mournful voice:

"I can remember biting into someone that was still alive."

"How old were you?"

"Maybe five or six. They were…gagged, and their scream sounded funny. Dad would string them up and bleed 'em out like pigs over a bucket. He used to let me hold the bucket. They'd be strung upside down and he'd slit," and the young man pantomimed a slit from ear-to-ear, "right across the throat. Then he'd use blood in cooking. He said it was the sodium in his BBQ sauce."

His parents were sentenced to death (his mother was executed in 1998; his father died of heart failure in 1994) but the Daley boy just seemed to disappear one day. He was remanded to a boy's mental health facility but never arrived, vanishing entirely until July of 1985, in Tampa, Florida.

Part 4

JUNE, 1985

Detective Frank Lewis was overweight in the midsection and balding, his hair resigned to mere scruffs of light brown atop his head. I met him once when he came to my house, after Queen Persphony had visited my home and spoken to me on my baby monitor. His eyes come to mind when I think of him; they had been kind, tired eyes, yet still intensely focused, and it had reminded me of my school teachers. When he asked me questions about what I had seen, he got down on a knee to be eye-level with a five year old. It had really mattered to me at the time, I distinctly remember, that he made the effort to be my equal in the situation. Close up, he had the face of a father, creased from frowning and wrinkled like a forgotten suit…but also knowing, disciplined. Patient.

He certainly didn't come off as a hero but, then again, I guess most heroes don't.

Det. Lewis had been the first man assigned to oversee the three kidnappings in southern PA. Three children had gone missing in three separate counties over a period of five months and each county had responded separate of one another, acting as if each missing child were an independent case.

Within hours, he had determined that the same person or people were involved with each kidnapping:

A beige Oldsmobile had been spotted in the area on the day of each occurrence.

The incidents were in broad daylight.

The same boot prints were found in the back yard of two scenes.

All of the children were white males around the age of 5.

I would have been the fourth child in PA; luckily, my mother intervened and the serial kidnapper left me behind, as well as his mask, which led to the fourth piece of evidence:

Male facial hair fibers.

When it became apparent that the cases were linked (as well as others), the U.S. Attorney General assigned an F.B.I. task force to unify all recent kidnappings in PA with the similar disappearances in Maryland and Delaware.

In addition to the F.B.I., however, there was a special request for Frank Lewis to serve as police liaison and second-line detective, as extra manpower.

Frank immediately ignored the request and continued to work on the case alone.

The DMV told him that there were over 1,400 beige Oldsmobiles in southern PA (over 5,000 if he expanded the area to MD and DE) and that it would be impossible to narrow it down without a license plate. The boot prints found in the soil of two locations belonged to a common, generic brand that could have come from any thrift shop in America. And the hair fibers came at a time when DNA evidence was in its infancy - there was no database to match it up, no Megan's Law to find local offenders, etc.

By the beginning of July, I was still the only witness that could detail the person that had called themselves Queen Persephony, and my description was vague at best: someone that sounded like a girl, like a bubbly fairy, wore an overcoat and bird mask, and wanted to collect "angels".

Det. Lewis was forced to wait for this Queen Persephony to strike again.

And then came a day when the phone rang…

“Is this Frank Lewis?” a voice asked.

“Yeah,” answered Frank.

“We got a fella down here,” spoke the casual drawl of Tampa Police Chief Hal Offanhitter, “might have some info on kidnappings in yer area.”

“Have you told the F.B.I.?”

“Yeah, I don’t think they’re taking this seriously. Contacted an agent involved in the kidnappings. Dead bodies that’ve already been charged ain’t exactly their priority right now. Neither is some autistic kid spouting off lies. Their focus is the kidnappings, though one of them sons ‘a bitches got me holding onto this kid, promising they’re gonna come pick him up sooner or later. Don’t seem to be liftin’ a damn finger about it, though.”

The two men finally got around to introducing themselves to one another and nearly skipped all formalities, as was customary during investigations.

“What kind of info? In Florida, you say?” Det. Lewis was confused.

“Yeah, down in Tampa. Here’s the thing…we don’t know exactly what it is we’re dealing with here, to be honest.” He sighed, disconcerted, and explained (as best he could) the situation involving the young man in custody and his many confessions.

“And he mentioned my missing kids in PA?”

“Yeah, in PA,” he read off a list, “Maryland, Delaware. All recent as of last year. Also fessed up to near’on fifteen murders across just about every state north’a Virginia. We got, ugh, let’s see…” Offanhitter was reading someone else's handwriting and kept having issues and cursing under his breath, even yelling out to the person that had written it, calling him a bastard“…we got six murders already been solved...in Connecticut, Mmm...mmmugh...Maine?—Goddamnit, Barry! You bastard, your scribbles are driving me goddamn insane—and New York. Got three cold murders in Pennsylvania and Ohio, one of which happened when this kid was like 2 years old – so his involvement is highly unlikely, if not goddamn impossible. And all that’s just to start, he’s prolly in there confessin’ to something else right now. Kid’s been rattlin’ these murders off without rhyme or reason. Thing that’s got me worried is that he mentions bodies that ain’t got no record…”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if he’s confessing to crimes that already happened—that he wasn’t involved in, then what the hell is he confessing that we don’t know about? Crimes that ain’t even been recognized yet? And if that’s fuckin’ true, how the fuckin’ hell does this kid know about ‘em?”

The more Offanhitter talked, the more confused Det. Lewis became. It was like working on a puzzle where none of the pieces match, and then someone else walks up and pours more pieces all over the place – pieces you’re not even sure belong to the original puzzle.

“I don’t get it,” Frank finally admitted.

“Well, he could have been reading police reports his whole life, watching crime scene videos and interrogations and confessions and so on, and he’s just reciting them back to us. I mean, we don’t know what the kid’s been up to the last ten years but I know for certain he wasn’t out there becoming the most prolific serial killer in U.S. history – the kid could barely buy soda from a gas station without drawing attention to himself.”

“But the things he’s saying check out?”

“So far. The details he’s giving us are real," continued Offanhitter. "We got an office full of people calling all over the northeast verifying everything – seems it’s all legitimate…except he ain’t the one that did it – we’re not even sure he did anything he’s confessing to. And he’s yet to confess to the murder we picked him up on. But still…one of the crimes was in Connecticut just two months ago. And he knew all the facts. I mean, I just don't got no idea what he's doing. How and who learns this shit so that they can confesses to murders they didn’t commit? The hell’s the point’a that?”

“Did he confess to grabbing my kids?”

“No…well, not your kids…”

J.F. Daley confessed to the kidnapping of a child:

"I used take my ‘daughter’,” he held up air quotes for the worddaughter, “to a playground near our house in Columbia. She was blonde and mousy and we went one week and while we were there, another child was swinging alone. He was dressed nice, as if for Sunday school even though it was a weekday. The reason I noticed him was because he was alone. Sometimes I saw older kids alone but never one as young as five, which he appeared to be. I encouraged my ‘daughter’,” air-quotes again, “who was also five or six at the time, encouraged her to swing next to him. We were playing and being silly as always but the boy was swinging slowly, quietly. Eventually I flat out asked him, Where's your parents? He said they would be there soon. I asked him his name. My name is Cooper. His words were morose, his skin a bit pale, his eyes and hair dark. I kept an eye out and we moved on from the swings but I let the boy slip from the front of my mind. When we were heading to our car I didn't see him but as I pulled away and passed the park once more on our way home, I saw him again swinging slowly, head down.

"A few days later I was driving passed the park. Again, the boy was there, swinging, head down. Again he was dressed in what looked like his Sunday best. Again he was completely alone but this time there were no other people in the park (or even anywhere close by) and it was nearing nightfall. A dangerous place for a young child alone. I pulled up close to the swing set and got out and approached the boy. His head was down. I asked him, Where are you parents? and he answered, They will be here soon. His words were morose. *But they're not here now? *The boy shook his head no.

"So I fucking snatched him."

Chief Offanhitter explained that the confession described the unsolved kidnapping of Cooper Henry from a playground in Columbia, Maryland, circa late 1973.

“Had all the details, knew more than Maryland P.D. had on the case – knew the boy’s outfit and the time of day he was taken. And it’s unsolved—so how does someone confess to a crime that took place half-a-country away, when they were 12?”

“Maybe he knows the kidnapper, got the information second hand…”

“So the kid knows a kidnapper from the early seventies that just happened to confess to him—and a kidnapper in the northeast nabbing children the last six months? Doesn’t really pan out unless it’s the same kidnapper, which is possible but unlikely since the cases this kid keeps spouting off seem entirely unrelated…”

“What other option is there?”

“We’re trying to find some sort of police warehouse or something, a place where this kid might have stayed and read all this info…but the fact that he might have known these people, interacted with some of them – that’s a line we’re trying to follow, as well, but getting the facts we want out of this kid is goddamn impossible. Sure he gives us fact after fact but it only leads us farther away, like trying to nail Jell-O to the goddamn wall—goddamnit, Barry! You bastard, is this a message or a fuckin’ sketch of a goddamn fuckin’ vacuum cleaner?” he interrupted himself to yell across the room; then returned. "F.B.I. keeps saying they’re comin’ to grab the kid when they got time, telling me to hold him in our cells until they can find him space and ship him north, but the pick-up keeps getting deferred, keep saying they’re low on space and manpower to fly down and grab him…”

“Could someone fly him up?”

“Maybe. Definitely not until next week, though. We got open cases down here, too, you know. Got any leads ‘sides this mind-fuck we got in our holding cell?”

“Some boot prints. Suspect description: over coat, dark-brim hat, bird mask—”

"Really?” Chief Offanhitter sounded interested.

“What?” asked Det. Lewis, a bit guarded.

“Well, the kid keeps drawing creepy bird faces. Says they belong to—”

“Queen Persphony?”

“Yeah, exactly. And we found something in his stuff, in the things he brought with him to Tampa. Bag of garbage mostly, but there was a negative—uh-uh-uh, like a picture that ain’t been developed yet, like one of those monochrome pictures. We found it in his stuff. Tried finding a source but it was so old and dirty…got us nowhere. I’ll make sure we send it.”

“Picture of what, exactly?”

“My guess? It’s yoursuspect.”

Part 5

Bryan Thomas was wearing his favorite gray PJs. He loved them most because they made him feel like He-Man, he had told his mother. And lying in bed, he was drifting off to sleep…

When his baby monitor chirped to life.

"Bryan," the bubbly, high-pitched voice whispered, "I've come back for you."

Bryan jumped from his bed and ran to the window, which was on the second floor and faced the street in front of their house. A shadowy figure was near the mailbox, just beyond the reach of light from a nearby streetlamp.

"You hewur, Qween Pe-sefeeny?" asked Bryan, with a speech impediment – he had a rough time saying Rs.

"Yes! And I got a present for you, Bryan," exclaimed the high-pitched, supremely pleasant voice, though still in a hushed whisper.

"Where?" Bryan asked, inching closer to the window as if he would be able to see the present if only he looked closer and harder at it.

"It's in your basement, angel," the voice answered. "I put it near the bottom of the stairs."

Bryan liked that. He knew his parents were in their bedroom watching television, that they'd never hear him if he snuck downstairs for a quick second. Before another word was spoken, he was in his hallway, scooting along the wall. Past his parents door. Down the first stair, the second. He skipped the third stair because it creaked. Then he was down all of the stairs and sneaking through the living room hallway, to the basement door. The house was dark and nearly impossible to navigate, silent and eerily empty.

Bryan opened the basement door slowly so that it didn't make a noise.

The basement light was already on.

Bryan ran down the old basement stairs, no longer worried about the creaking sounds; he was far enough from his parents that there wasn't a chance of being heard.

He eagerly searched for the present but found nothing but the dank basement and the house pet. "Fe-wix," he called out, as his cat Felix was nearby, "did you see a present?" The cat didn't respond or move. The black and white tabby was near the radiator and staring up, his attention on something.

Bryan called the cat again but Felix didn't budge, too busy staring up at something behind the radiator, at something Bryan could just make out—and then it moved.

"Qween Pe-sefeeny?" he asked, trembling.

"Yes, my angel," answered a sweet voice.

Det. Frank Lewis knocked on the door of Phillip Noyce. He knocked again. And again. No answer.

The rancher looked deserted, even condemned. Graffiti scarred the exterior. Trash littered the lawn. Windows were broken. Frank knew ole' Phil was inside. He could sense him—part of an extra sense he had developed over the years, the feeling of a scumbag looming nearby.

"Open the goddamn door, Phil!" Det. Lewis hollered. He was holding off on threats but he had one ready, if need be.

It was dark on all sides of the house except the front doorstep, which was lit only by a beaming white fluorescent bulb overhead. It was also a bit foggy, a bit damp. The rancher was buried in a thicket of forest near Lancaster, PA, right between the rural and suburban, but tucked away so it was hard to find, secluded.

"Open the door! So help me, I'll kick this fucker in and bring you up on a charge of evading!"

He had finally fallen back on threats.

Phillip Noyce was one of the few convicted pedophiles on record with access to a vehicle and a location central to each of the areas where children had been abducted. And Frank personally knew this bastard: from Phillip's days patrolling the streets for children in New Jersey; had personally charged him, watched his sentencing; and took note when, seven years later, Phillip was released. Det. Lewis always leaned on Phillip Noyce because he didn't like him, because Phillip was free even though he wasn't reformed, and because Phillip had a tendency to know the many creeps lurking in the area.

A scuffling, movement, a light inside, and the door opened.

Phillip looked dirty, as always, his hair was thick with grease, his skin a sickly sallow color, and a thin, misshapen mustache above his lip – even with the most superficial glance, he looked like a pervert.

"Entertaining guests?" Det. Lewis asked, pushing his way into the house. The screen door was already half-broken and the little shove helped dislodge it further.

The house smelled of old garbage. The carpet was covered in spills and smears of dirt and shit. The couch had bugs visibly crawling on it. Det. Lewis shuddered and continued through the house, ensuring no one else was hiding. It was a small place and he covered each room and its many corners quickly, finding little evidence of anything other than a disgusting lifestyle.

"Who's taking those kids, Phil?" asked Det. Lewis, finally getting to the point.

He edged Phillip Noyce through the kitchen threshold and into a chair in the corner. The narrow room was poorly lit in orange from a dying bulb over the table. Dishes lined the counter, all of them caked in brown and unwashed. The smell of the blackened sink was so god-awful that Frank avoided that entire side of the room.

Frank didn't actually believe Phil had any pertinent information. Sometimes it was just good to scare the predators, make sure they knew the jungle ain't a free-for-all.

"I-I-I have no idea," Phillip answered quickly, nervous.

Det. Frank Lewis immediately saw the nervousness.

"You son of a bitch," he started, flabbergasted, "you do know something, don't you?"

He grabbed a chair and shoved it at the dirtball.

Phillip's eyes were growing more worried with each passing second.

"No-no-no, look, I don't know anything. Nothing, really. It's just…"

"Oh ho ho," Det. Lewis got excited, "I'm all ears. What do you know?"

"In…in prison. There was this guy. He-he always…he always sort of talked about this group he had hear about, like-like-like a rumor. Out in the middle of nowhere. Said the group been hidin' bodies

everywhere, takin' kids. I-I always thought the guy was fulla shit but it-it just reminds me'a him. Is all…"

Det. Lewis kicked the nearby table, which made a loud clatter and startled Phillip.

"Information's lame, Phillip. Some asshole loudmouth in prison – a tip worth shit, it is."

Frank got closer, though not too close as he could tell Phillip had fleas and probably lice – if not worse.

"I know—I know," Phillip winced, hurriedly speaking, acknowledging it wasn't much in the way of substantial evidence, "dude was a freak—it was stupid. It's really all I know, I swear—he was just talking bullshit, I'm sure. Nonsense. Psycho was talkin' about somePrincess Pressany or some shit like—"

"Wait," Det. Lewis stood up. "What?"

"He was a psycho, lame, you know, not shit or anything," continued Phillip, still speaking quickly, still worried Det. Lewis was going to hit him.

"No. Who did he talk about?"

"Some freak he calledPrincess something or something, I don't remember – it was all fucked…"

"Queen Persephony?"

Phillip stared up at Det. Lewis, speechless.

He nodded.

"What else did he say?"

And then the power went out.

Part 6

Det. Frank Lewis was grilling the pedophile Phillip Noyce about his time in prison, about the loudmouth on his cellblock, when the power went out.

“It’s the generator, she always done that,” Phillip admitted.

“Is it gonna come back on?”

A moment of silence.

“If you’re nodding your head, Phillip, I can’t see it. Because of the black fuckin’ darkness, you idiot.”

“It probably needs gasoline.”

The moderately overweight Det. Lewis stood where he was, in the dark kitchen, careful not to touch anything since the chairs and tables around him were just as disgusting as everything else in the rancher, so he stood over Noyce as he asked the questions. The grease ball pervert knew more than he let on. Something wasn’t gelling.

“So your prison pal just up and tells you of a string of hypothetical murders and you just nod and listen.”

“No-no-ye-yeah, he told me. He said they been hidin' bodies forever but they don’t never keep no evidence—”

“Better watch those double negatives, boy,” Frank warned, lifting the shadow of a fist up as if he were about to deck Noyce. He was half-kidding, just winding up the pedophile; he knew that, sometimes to get at the right information, he had to attack. And attack. And attack. Not always physically, though that was sometimes necessary – but psychologically. Threaten their livelihood; threaten the things they cared about, like freedom; beat at them over and over, shake 'em up until they didn't know up from down. Same concept as holding something upside down and shaking it so everything loose falls out. Noyce might know something and not realize its importance. “I can hear you lying, Phil. You ain’t telling me something…”

Frank was just about to get angrier when a creak came from overhead.

Both men looked up at the ceiling.

There was a moment of silence.

“Who’s on the roof, Phil?”

Det. Lewis glared at the shadow of Phillip Noyce sitting in front of him, and he could sense that the man’s body had tensed up, could feel an immense fear in him. If the light was on, Frank was certain that there would be a horrified look on the pedophile’s face. The man was more scared of whatever was up on the roof than he was of the detective, of that he was certain.

Whatever was on the roof, Phillip Noyce didn’t appear to have invited it.

Det. Lewis removed the gun from the holster under his armpit and backed enough to keep a wall behind him, depriving anyone of the ability to sneak up on him in the darkness (though he made sure his back didn’t touch anything, as the place was covered in filth and he’d probably get hepatitis).

Phillip tried to speak, obviously distressed, but Frank ignored his pleading and instead cuffed him to the radiator, ordering him to, “Stay put.”

“They’ll kill me!” whimpered Noyce.

“Who? Who’s they? Who’s up there?”

Noyce stopped speaking. His body was shaking.

“If I come back and you’re gone, I will find you. And I will shoot you.”

With that farewell, Det. Lewis began wandering blindly through the rancher. He had no idea how he might get on the roof from the inside.Might not be an access through the ceiling. He thought a moment, circling through the dark living room, the gun pointed out. Shadowed edges, furniture, junk, dirt, stink…nothing moved.

thump-thump-thump-thump—another noise from the roof, like running.

Det. Lewis charged after the sound, toward the front door.

And then he was outside, surprised to find the porch light still on. It was welcome, the white fluorescent beam hanging over the front doorstep. Forest and a moist fog covered the night. He turned and pointed his gun up at the roof of the rancher, backing step after step into the driveway while searching for whatever was on top of the house. It was impossible to see much, especially with the glaring white light. His eyes lowered and darted for the nearest object to scale so he could climb for the roof. There was an air conditioning—

A shuffling just overhead.

Someone was right there, on the roof just above him.

Frank caught a glimpse of the figure but it was just a silhouette without any real definition – tall, slender – a person just staring down at him, their head crooked at any odd angle.

He pointed the gun up and called out—

But it was already gone.

Frank began patrolling the perimeter of the house when a scream ripped through the air—it was Noyce, in the kitchen. Det. Lewis darted back inside, through the dark living room, straight through to the kitchen—

The lights came back on.

Det. Lewis saw that he was too late.

Even though his life was over, Phillip Noyce’s eyes were still open. His head was tilted back and both eyes were wide and scared and searching around the room for help. Blood dribbled down his cheeks. He gurgled blood. Whoever had done it was already back out the door and safely hidden in the darkness, gone.

In the brief time Det. Lewis had left him alone, a female (as forensics found vaginal fluids) and a second person entered the house through the back door; while one stood and pinned Phillip down, silencing him, the female unzipped his pants, pulled out his manhood (which was still out), and straddled him for intercourse; after only a moment of this, the second person stuck their fist into Phillip’s mouth and grabbed hold of his jaw and pulled it apart so wide it snapped, dislocating; this was done so that, while grinding against his bare bits, the female could easily shove a thick kitchen knife deep into Phillip Noyce's gullet, so deep that the sharp blade sliced through his cheek and tongue, tonsils and uvula, even his vocal chords; then, one of them (presumably the female) jerked the knife up and down several times before leaving it in his throat, only the bottom portion of the handle sticking out from his mouth. Most of the knife had made it into his body and it prevented Phillip from

lowering his chin in those final seconds.

His scream had come from the knife sliding into his throat but now he was just trying to swallow, each gulp bringing the knife deeper, the blood squirting up and out like a geyser.

Phillip was drowning, and then he was dead.

Part 7

AUGUST, 1985

There was a wall covered in maps – one large map of the east coast and several county maps overtop, each one littered with dots and splotches of red tape and photos and post-its scribbled with notes. On the adjacent wall was a peg board with photos of dark looking men, criminals, deviants, possibilities. The rest of the office was full of filing cabinets and desks, some covered in papers, others completely empty. It had that governmental feeling, that white-washed, robotic atmosphere, especially with three coffee makers running simultaneously even though only two agents were present. The rest of the agents must have been out in the field, chasing leads or researching or investigating (or whatever it is they do, Frank thought privately).

He had finally made the trip to the main office of the F.B.I. task force overseeing the case, which was located on the fifth floor of an office building.

Agent Tasker, lead agent on the case, greeted Frank with an immediate hostility, citing the fact that Det. Lewis had been requested to help them yet, even after several calls to his department, he hadn't stepped foot in the building until that moment.

Frank brushed it off and began talking about the case.

Out of professional courtesy, the two men set aside their difference and explained what they currently knew. Det. Lewis elaborated on Phillip Noyce and the crime scene he had just left (and was currently avoiding paperwork on) while Agent Tasker listed some of the suspects currently sought for questioning, though they had been having luck tracking them down. It was like every scumbag in the northeast had gone into hiding.

"Besides finding people, what else are you two…"

Frank looked over to the second agent in the room, who nodded as he was introduced as Agent Chintzy, Tasker's right hand man; otherwise, the smelly man leaned back in a chair at a nearby desk, completely silent.

"We got about a dozen agents in the field. We got a team at headquarters checking every relevant database they can get their hands on."

"What about the kid in Florida? Tampa seems to think he might have something to do—"

"Who, the kid confessing to crimes that've already been charged? What the fuck does that have to do with seven missing children?"

Frank sighed, as he didn't know how to answer that question. A nearby picture caught his attention and he pointed at the Polaroid.

"Is anyone checking him out?" Det. Lewis asked.

"Who's that?"

"Raphael Suez. Took two children in the seventies. Never found the kids."

Detective Frank Lewis despised Raphael Suez. The man was only free on a technicality. (The D.A. lost the evidence against him. Literally showed up one day and told everyone that the evidence was gone from the filing system, possibly misplaced, probably gone forever; he was promptly fired.) When the local police heard Suez would go free, they pushed him out of the district, the county, and

the state of PA entirely – the man was a harbinger of all things bad.

"He's low priority."

"Why?" Frank asked, surprised.

"Two kids, ten years ago, in a case that was dismissed – not exactly top priority."

Frank asked again, even though it had just been explained.

Agent Tasker listed more reasons, like the fact that Suez's D.N.A. didn't match the hair they had found in the mask; also, they didn't have an infinite amount of people to follow an infinite amount of potential suspects, only enough to follow the biggest potential leads; and with the phone lines ringing off the hook with false or inconsequential information from every Tom, Dick, and Sally across the nation, they had to follow the most pertinent evidence – fingerprints and D.N.A.

Det. Lewis still didn't understand D.N.A. evidence.

"Where are you getting it all? D.N.A.'s in semen, right? Is every bad guy cumming everywhere when he commits a crime?" It was obvious that he was frustrated and that none of the answers he was getting were helpful.

"Semen? You know the crime scene you just abandoned, the one in Lancaster – I got a call not ten minutes ago about it from their Chief of police. Suspect on the roof, right? You remember him? Left D.N.A. on cigarette butts found on the roof, didn't match the victim."

Frank still had his eyes narrowed with an angry confusion.

Agent Tasker snorted at the man's ignorance.

"Means the suspects of that murder left D.N.A. evidence – a whole goey mess of it in the victim's lap, from what I hear." He began speaking slowly as if he was talking to a child. "We use it to eliminate suspects. Match D.N.A. like we do with fingerprints. Get it?"

"Who left cigarette D.N.A.?"

Agent Tasker let out a frustrated moan.

"The guy that distracted you so that other people could kill someone ON YOUR WATCH!" Agent Tasker responded angrily.

"Wait, he came on his cigarettes?!" Det. Lewis asked, flabbergasted.

Agent Remmy Tasker just stared down at Frank. He was an exceptionally tall, square man, near 6'4. Crew cut hair and scrunched face, all business. The only luxury it seemed he afforded himself was coffee, which he was drinking an endless supply of, black.

"No, D.N.A. is in saliva. Hair. Any bodily fluid. Skin. Idiot." He turned to Agent Chintzy and called out, "We better make sure police get more training on this. New method's gonna stop crime dead in its tracks and we got local police looking for cum everywhere."

Agent Chintzy laughed.

Agent Tasker turned back to Frank.

"Look," he growled, "we got our bases covered here. Been fine without you this far, filled us in on what you know—consider us filled in. You're free. You wanna investigated Fruity Two Shoes over there," he cast a finger at Raphael Suez's picture on the board, "then be my guest. Go looking for semen or whatever it is you do aside from bringing me dead bodies unrelated to my case. But don't

get in my fucking way while I do your job, understand?"

"Absolutely," Frank smiled. He had been pushing Agent Tasker since the moment he got there. Testing boundaries, poking him, seeing his reaction. This was Frank's way of understanding, and he acknowledged it and embraced it. Children thought we was cool (and he did have a soft spot for the kids) but adults thought he was a prick. A nagging, argumentative prick. And they were right.

Agent Tasker took on an expression of perplexity as Det. Lewis turned, calling back of his shoulder, "I'll report back when I'm done. Probably tomorrow since Suez is over in Virginia." His frustration and anger disappeared so thoroughly that it was as if it had never been there at all, as if he had just been acting.

And with a gracious wave goodbye, Det. Lewis walked back out the door he had just entered through.

A young man (probably no older than 17) and a mousy blonde woman entered the Tampa police station. She wore a black, short-sleeved police officer uniform and cap; the teenager in front of her wore baggy, flamboyant clothes, his hands cuffed behind his back.

They marched to the front desk.

"I got a juvenile from over the other side of Lakeland," the mousy blonde officer told the older gentleman at the front desk. He looked up from his paperwork and stared a moment at the teenager in custody.

"Phoned over, he's got priors here. Just bringin' him in to you," she went on.

"Prisoner transport?" the older man asked, looking over different paperwork.

"Yeah, I phoned ahead and told Bill I'd bring him over ASAP."

The perp kept his head down. The female officer made sure the teenager stood directly in front of her face, between her and the surveillance camera.

"Bill Fisher or Bill Dixon?" the older man asked, picking up the phone.

"You know what?" the female officer smiled, showing her perfect teeth. The officer cap hid her beautiful, curly blonde hair and the outfit did little to accentuate her body, but there was still a magnetic energy to her. The older man caught her glance and they locked eyes a moment. "I honestly don't remember which Bill," she laughed. "I'll tell you what, have an officer transport my prisoner here to a holding cell—" and then, scolding the prisoner, "—so you can have some time to think it over, this bullshit you pulled," and then back to the older officer, "and I'll come back there and find him myself, sort out the paperwork. I don't want you goin' out of your way."

The older man nodded, smiling, and called an officer over.

Within minutes, the mousy blonde officer had crossed the main office (her head down and hat over her face) and left out a back door; while the perp was escorted into the middle cell, uncuffed, and locked inside.

There were only two other cells, with no one to the left…

J.F. Daley was in the cell to the right – sitting on his cot, leaning against the wall – and he had noticed the new entrant walking in. Had he been normal, the 24 year old might have trembled with fear or spoke up to the officer…but he wasn't, and he couldn't. Instead, J.F. Daley sang a song while the teenager patiently waited for the escort to leave the holding cell area:

The cat catches the mouse The cat catches the mouse Hiiiiii Hooooo the Dairy-oooo The cat catches the mouse

---

Five hours later and Det. Frank Lewis arrived at yet another rancher in the middle of a goddamn forest at night.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me,” grumbled Frank.

He had an eerie sense of déjà vu and glanced up at the roof. This had “bad sign” written all over it but he didn't drive all that way just to turn around and go home. Raphael Suez lived there and, by law, would have had to alert the authorities if he moved –So he had better goddamn be here. Alone. Without a goddamn knife sticking out of his mouth.

Lucky for him, the location was much more organized. No trash strewn everywhere, the lawn cut, the forest at a distance, the surrounding land open and visible. The windows of the rancher were all intact, lights on in the living room and kitchen. Before knocking, he peered in. Raphael Suez was cooking something in a skillet on the stove, occasionally walking between the kitchen and the living room to watch something on television.

Detective Lewis knocked and Suez opened the door.

“Oh…hola detective. Long time no see,” the weasel-like Suez greeted. He had a pointed, ferrety face and shaggy black hair. He appeared meager, earnest; it was how he gained trust in order to commit such heinous crimes so easily. He was smart as a whip, too, and elusive, ducking the police for years by hiding in plain sight. Det. Lewis had met him briefly during the investigation into the two missing children and instantly recognized that this character was every shade of wrong. He could smell the murderer on him. (It had disgusted him so much when he found out Suez was going free on a technicality that Frank had contemplated the many ways he could ensure Suez wouldn't remain free. Wishful thinking, though, as Frank Lewis had lines and he didn’t like to cross them.)

“Let me in, Raphael. We need to talk.”

Raphael remained in the doorway.

“About what, detective? You a long way from Pennsylvania.”

“Am I?” And Det. Lewis pushed the door open, knocking the smaller Raphael back. (Frank outweighed him by nearly 60 pounds.) “I want to talk murders and missing kids, Raphael. Sit.”

He pushed Suez onto the couch—

“My food’s gonna burn!” he spat.

“Then you best speak fast. What do you know about murders all over the northeast coast?—about seven missing kids?—about this psychoQueen Persphony?! And you better not say ‘nothing’ because I know you know something.”

Raphael was trapped on his couch while Det. Lewis stood over him.

“Man, I don’t know shit. I ain’t even been ‘round since ’79 so you ain’t got shit—”

He tried to stand but Frank pushed him back down and leaned in.

“What’s that? Did you—did you just threaten me?” Frank acted as if he were offended. “Did you just threaten my life and the life of my police brethren?”

“Man, fuck off with that bullshit. I ain’t say nothing.”

Smoke was lilting from the kitchen. It smelled of burning.

“See, that’s the problem. You ain’t tellin’ me shit here, Raphael. It’s quite disappointing.”

Det. Lewis withdrew the pistol from its holster under his armpit—BANG. He fired a shot and blew apart a nearby lamp. The explosive echo of the gun’s discharge scared the hell of the weasel-y man and temporarily deafened him. Frank was used to it.

“Wow, did you just attack me in an attempt to take my service weapon, Raphael? A discharged officer’s weapon?—well, that requires a W21-09 form and two officer witnesses to the scene of the incident.” He was making it up, completely oblivious to the actual form titles. “So I guess I should call the local P.D. and get them looking over your nice place here. Got anything you don’t want us finding—and that shot could have hit me, Raphael. These are all felony offensestsk-tsk Mr. Suez.”

Raphael was getting more upset. Smoke was beginning to billow, turning black. The scent of burning had become overwhelming. There were crackles from the kitchen stove, oil bubbling.

“Did you know oil catches fire when it gets too hot? Called an oil fire.” As he spoke, Det. Lewis kept the squirming Suez pinned to the couch, eventually resting his knee on Raphael’s chest and pinning him down with body weight. “They’re a bitch to put out, too. Learned that the hard way, nearly burnt down the ole’ apartment a while back.”

Suez never stopped struggling, cursing a blue streak.

“Just tell me something, anything useful, and I’ll let you go. I'll leave.”

“They—” Suez started and then stopped himself.

Det. Lewis caught it – he saw the defeat in the man’s eyes, no matter how short or small, he saw it. It was what he had been waiting for, the sign. It was that moment when he could see the information surface, see the culpritthink of what they had done, think about something they were a part of, think about that one piece of information they really didn’t want to say. Finding it was what made him such a good detective.

“I fucking knew it!” he said and stood, lifting Suez off the couch. “Who’s THEY!?” he screamed, throwing him Suez into the kitchen. Raphael flew through the threshold and into the pantry against the kitchen wall, knocking it back.

Det. Lewis walked into the kitchen determined to threaten Raphael Suez with the burning hot grease in the pan on the stove. He approached him, took the skillet by the handle, and lifted it into the air, showing Suez he was a step away from pouring scalding hot grease all over him…when he noticed something.

Throwing Suez into the room, the man had hit against the side of a pantry and pushed it away from its spot against the wall. It revealed a seam in the plaster, barely noticeable. Det. Lewis put the pan on the counter and pushed the pantry a bit more, keeping an eye on Raphael, who had lost his angry expression and was now much more sullen, glummer. His eyes lowered to the floor and remained there.

There was a doorway behind the pantry.

He opened it and found a dark passageway leading down.

A faint sound drifted up.

Frank listened to it carefully until he could distinguish the familiar sound.

It was a distant sobbing.

Det. Lewis stood back. His gun was in his hand, as it had been since he first removed it (when he threw Suez, it had briefly pointed up toward both of their faces), and he lifted it slightly to point it in Suez's face. He wanted to smile, since he knew he was right - but he couldn't, too worried about what lay ahead.

Frank used the nearby kitchen phone to call for back-up, his eyes steadily focused (with a healthy level of hatred) on Raphael Suez. After hanging the receiver back on the cradle, he finally asked, "Whatcha got in the basement, Raphael?"

Part 8

The overwhelming stench of warm, rotting skin wafted up as if a tomb had just been opened for the first time in centuries, so pungent that Det. Frank Lewis had to cover his face in a moist towel before descending the stairwell. (If it wasn't for the sound of someone crying, and the urgency that necessitated, he would have waited for back-up to bring an oxygen tank and mask. As it was, the nearest cruiser was ten minutes out, with a whole swarm of police following close behind.) Det. Lewis couldn't risk it; he'd have to go down there, just in case someone was in mortal danger, or wounded.

The squirrelly man responsible for the dungeon, Raphael Suez, walked in front for Frank as they stepped on weak, creaking steps on their way down a narrow stairwell covered in black mold, and into a pitch-black basement. (This time he was bringing the suspect with him, as leaving someone handcuffed, alone, in a kitchen, hadn't especially worked out the last time.) Frank kept one hand on the smaller man's shoulder while the other hand pressed a gun against his spine.

Frank stopped, first to gag, and then to call out, muffled through the towel, "Turn on the fucking lights…" He also mumbled "or I'm gonna use gunfire to see" but Suez didn't understand the muffled threat.

"Light's in the middle. Hanging bulb," replied Suez, somberly.

"How many people are down here?"

Suez thought about how he wanted to respond.

"Alive? Just one…I think."

Det. Lewis groaned.

It was absolute darkness at the bottom. No windows. Nothing. The crying was close. Soft, more like scared whimpers now – presumably because someone was approaching and that must have always preceded an evil torture or some other awfulness. The whimpers sounded male, younger but definitely not a child.

"It's alright," Frank called out, lowering the towel a moment to speak clearly, "I'm here to help. Can you come toward me?" Then, angrily to Suez, "Can they come toward us?"

"No," answered Suez defiantly, and he gave no further explanation.

Det. Frank Lewis lifted the towel back over his face before hitting Suez in the back of the head with the butt of his pistol. Groggy, Suez stumbled further into the darkness, half-pushed by Frank (who returned a hand to the man's shoulder and the gun to its place against his spine).

The men were entirely enshrouded in darkness, an impenetrable blackness on all sides. The light at the top of the stairwell behind them was no help, as it barely illuminated the stairs. And it was unnaturally silent but for the gentle whimpering, which continued to soften as the men moved closer. Even with a hand on his shoulder and the gun against his back, Det. Lewis couldn't see Raphael Suez in front of him – he could feel his presence, feel him slowly moving forward, carefully navigating the darkness – but he couldn't even make out a silhouette of the man.

Blackness, complete and utterly blinding.

The crying came from the right, though Det. Lewis had the distinct feeling that there was someone else to the left; he had that feeling of a heavier wind when someone was near, of eyes watching, the

presence of someone else…

"I swear to God, if anyone else is down here and they come at me, I'm gonna freak the fuck out and you're gonna spend the rest of your goddamn days drinking your meals in a prison hospi—" he interrupted his threat to gag into the towel.

That stench!—it was inconceivable that it could get worse but it had, it had become thicker, in the air like a solid fog that stuck to the skin, fetid and as encompassing as the darkness.

"Ain't no one down here gonna attack you," assured Suez.

They reached the center of the room and Suez lifted an arm, reaching blindly in the darkness.

"You got two seconds to turn on that ligh—"

Again, Det. Lewis' cut off his threat to gag, except this time it was worse. He pulled the towel down and spat several ounces of puke to the side, keeping a hand on Suez's shoulder even as he lowered the gun a moment.

(There was the briefest moment when Frank could have sworn he heard someone whisper, "Kill him" but)

A bright flash of light disrupted everything – not light from an overhead bulb, as he had expected, but from a concussive blow to his temple. It was the stars of being hit in the facecalled photopsia, Det. Lewis' train of thought derailed a split-second,or phoshenes, when the blow's actually—and then he snapped out of it, under attack. His body assumed a defensive position, instant muscle memory from his many years of training, even at a time when his mind hadn't been prepared.

Suez had gotten out of his reach and scurried away, invisible in the darkness.

The crying had stopped.

The room was now a void of light and sound.

He paused, listening for movement.

Silence.

He fired a single shot from the handgun up into the ceiling—

In that FLASH, he saw Suez sprinting toward him, a sharp weapon in the man's hand—raised like a dagger, running at Frank, sprinting, making a mad dash full speed straight at him—

Each muzzle flash illuminated the scene like a flip-book. The first shot was reactive and missed. The second hit Suez in the shoulder and slowed him—but the man was already leaping forward. Third shot, fourth, and Raphael Suez dropped to the ground.

The blast echoes abruptly vanished until only two sounds remained: the chamber was empty and clicking; and Det. Lewis pained howls and whimpering. Suez had gotten close, had leapt at him, had stabbed him deep in the thigh with a rusty spike.

Instinctively, Frank grabbed the spike sticking from his thigh and ripped it out in a fluid, agonizing movement.

Det. Frank Lewis released a scream of utter agony.

And then he puked again.

His head was bleeding from the initial blow, and his thigh was gushing blood, and he was surrounded by complete darkness, but Detective Frank Lewis pushed on in an adrenaline frenzy. He quickly

limped forward until hitting upon the string tied to a hanging bulb. Pulling it, he shed light on the horrors that surrounded him.

The crying had been from a teenage boy in the corner. He was naked and tied to spikes in the floor, spread eagle. (These spikes were similar to the one that had just stabbed him.) Besides the fear and emotional pain he must have suffered, the boy appeared otherwise physically unharmed – no bleeding or open wounds, no bruises, nothing.

The other bodies in the basement hadn't been as lucky.

The putrid stench was coming from the mummified remains of four corpses, all of them stood up like trophies, lined and leaning against the left wall. Each body was wrapped in plaster, the torso and arms bound together, their faces completely uncovered (though their dark eyelids and black lips had been sloppily stitched together). The legs were wrapped individually to the thighs and spread, with the area between their legs bared. Some of the bodies had decomposed for so long that metal poles had been duct-taped up the legs to the hip region in order to keep the legs attached and the bodies from crumbling in two.

There was also a work bench against the far wall (where Suez had disappeared to in the darkness, to grab a weapon) and it was littered with a bunch of medieval-looking instruments, hunks of rotted flesh and grizzled hair caught in the serrated edges.

Det. Lewis took note of these gruesome details but hardly stopped to linger, freeing the young boy from his binds, wrapping him in his coat, and then lifting him from the floor to carry him upstairs. The boy was heavy and the pain he felt was excruciating—but Frank Lewis stopped being an officer of the law, stopped being a detective in a crime scene, and he became a person, just a person, one that saw another, much younger person in need of help, and he was going to do whatever it took to get that boy out of that goddamn dungeon and into some fresh air.

The police would arrive shortly after to find a sobbing boy sitting against the wheel of a car in the driveway…

And Det. Lewis beside him, unconscious.

"How could that have HAPPENED!?" Agent Tasker screamed into the phone.

"Well, sir, your department was supposed to pick him up from Tampa and transport him north but no one ever showed up, and no further order was given." Chief Offanhitter didn't like speaking with the F.B.I. so he had passed the duty of the call to his subordinate, who performed the task with a mighty struggle. "He was detained in our holding cells awaiting F.B.I. transport for near on two weeks."

The voice on the other end of the phone was far too calm, which only served to anger Agent Tasker further.

"Explain it to me one more time," he snarled.

"Yesterday afternoon—"

Agent Tasker cut him off.

"—a female officer – who you can't identify – dropped off a man – who you can't identify – and you put him in a cell next to someone who might have been THE ONLY WITNESS in a series of fucking CHILD KIDNAPPINGS!"

“That is uh, correct. Yes.”

There was a moment’s pause.

The voice on the line was hesitant…but ultimately decided to go on.

“Our video surveillance caught very little of the woman. And there was little remaining of the bomber. The blast was so powerful it took out all three holding cells, even the concrete wall.”

“And this witness? No chance? Blown apart?”

“Well, actually…” Agent Tasker’s spirits were briefly lifted, only to be dashed once more, “…he was poisoned first. Before the explosion. So he was dead before…the bomb…even…went off…”

Agent Tasker hung his head.

“You’re fired,” he finally said.

“Sir, you can’t—”

“Don’t tell me what I can’t do,” he went on in a sobering monotone. “You’re fired. Anyone else responsible, they’re fired, too. I’ll make sure the paperwork is sent over before your shift ends. You can go ahead and let them know, anyone that had anything to do with this fuck up—they’re out. Gone. Fired.”

He hung up the rotary phone and stared at the maps pasted to the wall until his eyes glazed over and he saw nothing.

Detective Frank Lewis woke in a hospital bed.

It was just before dawn.

Confused, disoriented, he checked himself over – first grabbing his balls to make sure everything that mattered most was intact; then he gave a quick search to make sure his other limbs were still attached. They were, with the addition of a bandage on his right thigh where—and then he remembered. That fucker stabbed me.Surprisingly, the wound didn’t hurt, and neither did the swollen lump on the side of his head.

In fact, he felt pretty damn if – if a bit dizzy and unable to focus.

Trying to dial back the double vision, he shifted the IV sticking from his arm so that he could twist his legs over the side of the bed and prepare himself to stand. He was bleary but cognizant enough to know that there was one thing he needed to take care of before he could truly rest, so he was just going to have to get up and—then he fell flat on his face, knocking over the bedside table in the process. His left leg wasn’t working properly, still numb (presumably from stitching closed the gaping hole in it).

Two nurses rushed into the room at the sound of an overweight man knocking shit over as he fell. Against his wishes, they helped him back into bed and forced his legs back under the blankets and asked what he needed, what he was doing, why he had gotten out of bed. He ignored their questions, asking numerous questions of his own. They came out slurred.

“Eeeers the booooough?”

He shook his head.

The nurses shook their heads, too, as they didn’t understand.

“Get…me…dooctur…” he muttered.

One of the nurses nodded and left the room while the other waited beside the detective, making sure he didn’t try to stand or leave. While they waited, he motioned for a nearby pad of paper and a pen, which the nurse hesitantly handed to him. A few minutes later, the doctor arrived and, though not understanding anything Frank said, he relayed all the right information.

“You lost a lot of blood.” The doctor looked over a chart in his hand. “Nine stitches. Just missed the femoral artery, lucky ducky. Mild concussion. Rest, let the anesthesia wear off.” He looked up from the chart to stare into the detective’s eyes. “The boy you saved, he’s down in the I.C.U. You saved his life. Just in time, it would appear. He may need emotional counseling but,” he flipped a few pages in the paperwork, “there doesn’t appear to be any trauma to the body, nothing internal, nothing physical at all. Whatever was gonna happen to him, you stopped it.” He looked back into Frank’s eyes and reached a hand out. “You’re a hero.”

Det. Lewis shook the doctor’s hand—as the doctor released his grip, he found a crumbled note in his palm that had been written in the interim before his arrival.

In sloppy, scribbled writing, it read:

Gt me gdamn phne

“With this handwriting, you could be the doctor,” he chuckled.

No one else laughed.

The doctor turned to one of the nurses and nodded toward the door. The nurse left to retrieve a phone.

“You’re probably going to need a translator so I’ll let one of the nurses stay with you, do your speaking. Just write what you want to say. Then I want you to rest. Press the buzzer if you need anything.”

The doctor and second nurse left as the other nurse returned with a phone and wire, which she plugged into the extra phone outlet.

Det. Lewis tried to one-eye the dialing of the phone, as he was incapable of seeing straight, and instead had to write the number for the nurse to dial.

Even though it was just before dawn, Agent Tasker answered the office phone.

The nurse explained to Agent Tasker that Det. Frank Lewis was incapable of speaking and that he was writing an important message that she would then read. Frank finished scribbling and held up the note.

The nurse squinted, attempting to read the chicken scratch.

“I think it says…‘Tell that fucker I was right.’”

Detective Lewis smiled, nodding that the nurse had read the note correctly, and then he lay back in the hospital bed, satisfied.

That was all he had wanted to relay.

It would be six more hours before the conversation with the F.B.I. would resume, after Det. Lewis had gotten some more rest and ate a large breakfast (delivered to him by the local police department, in gratitude).

“The snitch in Tampa was murdered,” Agent Chintzy, Tasker’s right-hand man, informed the detective.

He told him all the gory details about what had happened in Florida. “And they found the body of a man named Quinn Duggan—no, wait. Durgin. Quinn Durgin. Wanted for questioning, possible connections. Found his body off the coast of Rhode Island.”

It took a moment before Det. Lewis reached an obvious conclusion.

“What about finding people linked to—“ he groaned, shifting his weight, “—links to the crimes that the Tampa kid was talking about, all his fake confessions or whatever they were.”

“Agent Tasker has begun to do just that…”

“And…”

“Well, he just started last night but—”

“But all the leads are dead or missing, right?”

“It would seem that way.”

“So anyone with links to these missing kids, potential witnesses, suspects—even the loser scumbags with ties to crimes that might not even be directly related—everyone’s just missing or dead, gone—off the map? Am I right?”

“It would seem so. We have not, uh, had any luck. For now, at least.”

Det. Lewis pressed the buzzer for a nurse.

“I gotta go.”

He hung up as the nurse walked in.

The local police department had also brought him a change of clothes, sweatpants and a tee-shirt and wind-breaker. He dressed as he talked.

“Is that boy still in the I.C.U.?”

She shook her head.

“He was moved upstairs.”

“What’s his condition?”

“Stable. Not really vocally responsive but stable.”

“Has his parents shown up? Family?”

“No, we don’t know where his parents are or where he came from. Told us his name’s Justin Beach but that was about the only thing he’s said.”

Name rings a distant bell, something about the last name Beach…

He shrugged it off.

The nurse was still talking.

“He’s not from Virginia, so far as the police can tell. At least no one’s reported him missing, no birth record or medical record.”

“You need to take me to a doctor, I’m gonna need a goddamn bottomless supply of painkillers—are there any officers still here?”

“Yes.”

“Good, ask one of them to sit outside the kid’s room until I get there.”

He finished dressing and hobbled forward, then stopped. The nurse just stared at him, unsure of what to do. He scooted his hands toward her, ushering her out the door. “Pretend it’s an emergency dear.” Realizing she needed to make haste, the nurse quickly led them into the hallway, Frank limping close behind her.

“Why?” asked the nurse, worried.

“Why?...Call it a hunch.”

Later that day, a mousy blonde in a Virginia Hospital nurse’s outfit made the rounds. She strolled lazily, peeking into rooms. When staff asked if she was lost, her response was quick and concise: she was a new intern and had been instructed to “get familiar” with the hospital. Then she’d give a brilliant smile and move on. No one argued or second-guessed her; the hospital was large and one branch didn’t always interact with the others. After she had causally strolled past every patient room and straight through the ICU, the mousy blonde returned to the locker room, replaced the uniform, and left.

Part 9

"I need to clear my head a moment," Det. Frank Lewis told the young, nearly mute Justin Beach.

The teenage boy (probably about 15 years old) stared on, silent as he had been all day. He had pale skin and dark features made all the more gloomy by his deep, impressionable eyes; they were always down, always searching the ground, always in deep mourning.

The motel room was small, with two twin beds and a tan curtain over the wide front window, one that bathed the room in coffee-colored light. There was a bathroom with not enough towels and a small black and white television on top of a faux-wooden dresser missing several drawer knobs. Det. Lewis had run out to the car earlier and brought in the single personal item he carried with him everywhere: a small boom box. He pushed the television back and set the silver-colored, 10 inch boom box on the dresser and inserted a cassette tape into the front. He pressed play.

Marvin Gaye began playing from the tiny boom box—

Justin startled and backed up the bed.

Det. Lewis jumped at Justin's sudden movements, and then watched him with a surprised curiosity. It was the music, the boom box. Justin stared at it, horrified.

"It's—no, it's just music."

Det. Lewis stood up and walked over to the boom box and turned the volume down, turned the tape off, turned it back on – all in an attempt to show Justin just what it was. The kid stared at Frank, then the boom box, then Frank, the horrified look slowly dissipating back into sadness. The kid returned to (what appeared to be) his normal pose: straight back, knees together, hands folded in his lap, and his head down. When he looked around, his chin remained down and the boy would stare up with brown doe eyes.

Frank sighed and shook his head.

The motel phone rang.

He answered.

"So explain how this is relevant," came a stern voice.

Finally, Agent Tasker.

Det. Lewis had recently been updating Agent Chinzty, Tasker's right hand man, while Tasker went out into the field. It was nearly four in the p.m., six hours after they had left the hospital.

"I know this kid has something to do with whatever the hell is going on, just like I know that guy in Tampa knew something – and now we can't ask him, can we? This is relevant, I just know it is. I can feel it." Det. Lewis made the statements and neither expected nor intended to say anything further than that, as his intuition was 9/10ths of the job. Agent Tasker asked for supporting evidence but Frank just repeated, "I just know it's relevant."

Like everything else, this only further enraged the leader of the F.B.I. task force, enough so that Agent Tasker began yelling that Det. Lewis had removed a minor from medical custody on a hunch and that this was only serving to worsen the kid's emotional state.

"You find out who the kid is yet, at least do me that fav—"

Agent Tasker interrupted with a noise, then removed some of the anger from his voice.

“He’s a missing child from Pennsylvania, went missing about twelve years ago.”

“No shit…” Det. Lewis mumbled and looked at the kid, who was still seated, knees together, back straight, chin down, hands folded in his lap.

—it came back to him like a whip, why the name had been so familiar…

Justin Beach’s disappearance happened at a time before Frank had been promoted, when he was just a foot soldier in full officer gear, patrolling the streets. The disappearance happened in a different district but resources were pulled from all around the state to search for the kid, as they suspected he had become lost in nearby woods. Frank had been one of the thousand or so to go out into that forest overnight, searching every stump and gully with a flashlight while calling the boy’s name until his throat was hoarse. It was a distant memory, foggy and nearly forgotten. The boy wasn’t found and authorities continued to believe that the kid had wandered off, that one day they’d find a five year old body succumbed to the elements; they never did.

There was a knock at the door.

“Hold on,” he told Tasker and set the phone down on the bedside table, reaching for the gun holstered under his armpit. “Who is it?” he called out, shutting the music off.

“Housekeeping,” answered a polite female voice.

Det. Lewis limped to the door and checked through the eye-hole.

A mousy blonde in a housekeeping uniform stood just outside.

He released his hold on the holstered weapon, took off the chain lock, and opened the door.

“Thanks, we need towels,” he informed the woman and then turned his back to her, returning to the phone.

He sat on the bed nearest the bathroom, picked up the receiver, and continued.

The mousy blonde entered the motel room with a stack of towels under her arm.

“At least tell me you found something new or useful or anything, goddamnit,” Det. Lewis scolded, half-annoyed at constantly being accosted yet hopeful that there was something new, something old, anything…so long as it pointed in some direction to follow.

Young Justin Beach lifted his eyes (his chin still down) and they followed the mousy blonde as she walked into the motel room with a pile of towels under her arm, followed her as she disappeared into the bathroom, at which point he began to sing a low rhyme…

The cat catches the mouse The cat catches the mouse Hiiii Hoooo the Dairy-ooo The cat catches the mouse

Agent Tasker was still talking but Detective Frank Lewis wasn’t listening. He lowered the receiver, bewildered by the kid; then, concerned. The singing (which the kid kept repeating) was eerie enough, but there was electricity in the air, an awful feeling of dread—

The housekeeper was standing behind him—he hadn’t even noticed her exit the bathroom and wouldn’t have turned to look behind him if it wasn’t for Justin’s bizarre singing.

Her beady eyes had a blood thirsty glare, her lips curled in a wicked smile…they locked eyes for the briefest moment, but then a glare caused him to notice the massive kitchen knife gripped in her right hand—as soon as he glanced down, the mousy blonde leapt.

Det. Lewis dropped the phone with just enough time to dodge her vast swipe. The knife sliced through the air with a swish Det. Lewis had only ever heard in movies.

The mousy blonde landed on the bed, bounced up like a cat, and lunged at him again – and though he dodged her again, the knife still caught him, still nicked his arm, cutting through the shirt for a gash across his bicep. He fell back next to Justin on the second bed (the kid was still singing, repeating the tune over and over, unmoving), and Frank pushed the kid to the floor, out of the way of harm—then he scooted back and spread his legs just far enough for the mousy blonde's third attempt to miss his lap.

The knife stuck into the mattress.

He had a split-second to react and he took it, punching the woman square in her eye.

She took the blow, backed up, and lunged again.

Det. Lewis rolled back between the bed and the front window, finally standing in an offensive position.

The psychotic, mousy blonde housekeeper licked her lips, slowing for a second. She stood on the bed in-between them, smiling as she tossed the kitchen knife from her right hand, to her left, then back to her right—

The final lunge was the same as her previous efforts and Det. Lewis was prepared this time. He moved aside as the knife swished through the air, swung around, grabbed the woman from behind, and used her own momentum (as well as all of his strength) to push her through the motel window. The tan curtains went with her as glass shattered, sunlight flooded, and the woman crashed through the thick glass window pane, landing out on the third-floor walkway.

Det. Lewis fell back as his momentum went with the woman out the window. He fell back on the bed and rolled, quickly jumping to his feet, back up on his feet, running—limping to the door, out of the room, to the third floor walkway covered in glass and a shredded curtain…

But the woman was gone.

Part 10

It was a fiery argument, both men nearly yelling at one another.

"I'm not telling you a single fucking detail," Det. Frank Lewis spat. "If you were any good at your fucking job you'd be able to find me on your own, anyway. But you're not. Now fix your fucking leak."

Agent Tasker was already talking over him.

"—Then you've just KIDNAPPED an UNDERAGE kid without consent of the federal government," growled Agent Tasker. "If you don't bring him in immediately, consider yourself wanted by the F.B.I."

There was a pause while Agent Tasker let the threat sink in.

Det. Lewis had already walked away, leaving the pay phone off the cradle.

Agent Remmy Tasker followed through on his threat and put it out on the wire that Detective Frank Lewis was now sought for questioning by the F.B.I. It was ahush-hush order, that Frank was to be found quietly – no national news, no local police – and he was to be brought to the P.A. task force office, which currently served as F.B.I. headquarters for the case of the missing children.

It was late when he was done, when the final call was made and final order sent. Agent Tasker sat at one of the desks on the fifth floor of the office building. The filing cabinets were quickly filling up, every desk scattered with papers and junk food wrappers. His eyes were on the maps pasted all over the wall, a coffee in his hand.

His right hand man, Agent Chintzy, was at a nearby desk – head was down and snoring loudly. Tasker had picked a desk several over from his confidante because the man had a habit of never leaving – which was an amazing work ethic (Tasker had never met a harder, more honest worker) but it also meant the man went without showering, or changing, or shaving, for days. He was often remanded to office duty because of this, which Chintzy was comfortable with. Aside from his amazing work ethic, he was also a neat freak and kept the files organized.

Agent Tasker stared at the wall of maps, thinking.

Det. Lewis was an abrasive dick…but something didn't sit right.

The detective's main point of contention was that, whenever a suspect was wanted for questioning, they somehow ended up dead or in the process of dying, or missing entirely. Every. Single. One. Even suspects they had caught were dying.

It's a pattern, not a coincidence, Frank had repeated several times.

Every time Frank had set out to find someone of interest, or had found something that might be a piece of evidence, it always ended up in the goddamn air and gone—Agent Tasker was quick to remind Frank that he had personally killed his own suspect the night before—but Frank went on, citing the motel room incident and the mousy blonde that had attacked him. How the hell did she know where I was? he kept asking. It was a valid question. Frank had only one answer: someone inside the department was feeding answers to the bad guys. Agent Tasker, on the other hand, didn't find it as simple as that – someone could have followed him from the hospital when he left with the boy.

Nothing was certain…

And though he stood firm on the subject while screaming at Frank, Agent Tasker had begun to have his

doubts. Something didn't sit right. It seemed they met bad fortune at every turn.

Not a coincidence…a pattern…

He threw a pad of post-its at Agent Chintzy's puffy, light brown hair. It hit and bounced off and Chintzy woke with a choking snore. His head lifted, his eyes tired. (He had been in the building over 48 hours.)

"Wake up, I got theory," Agent Tasker called over.

Agent Chintzy started to stand and walk over but Tasker motioned for him to stop and remain at his seat. He was close enough. (No one had taken the desk next to him.)

"Ok, shoot," responded Agent Chintzy, leaning back in his roller chair. He picked up a mug of coffee he had started drinking hours before and, though ice cold, he resumed drinking the murky black liquid.

"Call it Frank's theory. Devil's advocate. So say there's a leak somewhere. F.B.I., local police, political – someone, somewhere, leaking our leads."

Agent Chintzy furrowed his brow.

"Just, follow," continued Tasker, "let's shake it and see if anything falls out. Think about it…" and Tasker did, deeply, thinking aloud, "…it couldn't be local police 'cause it would have to be local in each state. And they don't communicate with each other, just us. Unless the leak is Frank." He sighed. "But I doubt that."

"You sure?" Chintzy spoke up. "Think about it: He's always the one there. And the suspect always dies. You know, now he's not bringing back the kid." He tsk'd and looked out the window. "Goes all the way out to nowhere Virginia and just so happens to stumble upon some torture dungeon, alone, and kills the suspect a few minutes before the police show up? Does that make sense?"

Agent Tasker nodded.

"Yeah," he said, half-heartedly.

"What?" asked Chintzy.

"He didn't know about Durgin in Rhode Island, you know? He didn't know about any of our leads. He didn't even step foot in here until yesterday. If there was a leak, it's gone on from the beginning – and unless he was accessing the F.B.I. database—there's no chance of that. He seems like he could barely handle a filing cabinet let alone a computer. We haven't told him anything and, I mean, every suspect has gone missing or been found dead." He bit at his thumb. "That's either the worst fuckin' luck I've ever seen on a case or he's right, something's wrong."

"If it's not him, there aren't many other options…" and Agent Chintzy's eyes crossed from desk to desk of the other men, most of which spent their time out in the field.

Agent Tasker continued biting his thumb, his eyes also jumping from desk to desk as if each one symbolized the person on their small group.

"Well—" Agent Chintzy started loud but then lowered his voice, whispering, "who had access to the information from the start?"

Agent Tasker sighed, as he would need to bring Agent Chintzy closer (body odor and all) in order to whisper, since yelling across the room about a treasonous coworker wasn't really an option. Chintzy walked over and took a seat from a nearby desk and inched in closer to Tasker, both of them huddled

low and whispering.

Tasker only breathed through his mouth.

They began listing their coworkers when a phone call interrupted them.

Agent Tasker answered, listened for a moment, told them to stay put, thanked the caller, and then hung up.

"What was that?" Chintzy asked.

"Frank's hiding out at his sister's house in South Carolina."

"Are they bringing him in?"

"No, not yet. I told them to stay put while I think about this. Got a man stationed there to keep tabs in case he leaves."

"Why not?" Chintzy asked, puzzled.

"Because what if he's right," Tasker responded as if Chintzy hadn't been listening.

"You really think it's possible? That there could be a leak?"

"I don't think it should be dismissed. I mean, if there's a leak, as you said, there aren't many options. Frank's been around since the beginning – and he could have had some access to the files. You and me," his eyes looked from desk to desk and he leaned in close to Agent Chintzy, "…we can check everyone's phone records, check to see who called Tampa P.D. and told them to keep the witness in a holding cel—"

The back-half of Agent Remmy Tasker's skull blew out in a mushroom-cloud of brain and bone. His body recoiled back into his seat, hard, and he bounced forward and onto the floor, dead.

Agent Chintzy holstered the small pistol he kept at the ankle and made two calls:

The first was to track down the address of Det. Frank Lewis's sister's house in South Carolina…

And the second was brief:

"I have a mess to clean up and then I'm coming home. The detective and boy are at 345 Sea Mountain Highway in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Get 'em both. This can end with them. Send everyone."

A dark sedan parked half a block away had only just shut its lights off before Detective Frank Lewis flagged it as F.B.I. Their cars were always so easy to spot because of their shape: square-ish, hard corners. Frank didn't understand why they didn't sometimes opt to drive a car with softer edges, or at least not as jagged. Always looked like a moving cardboard box.

"Eh, well, shit, they know I'm here." He checked his watch. "On the run for six hours. New record."

His sister's house was on the coastline of the ocean, a single-story, two bedroom home positioned twelve feet off the ground by a series of wooden support beams. (All of the coastline houses were a story off the ground, even those several blocks inland, as flooding was common during hurricane season.) A single stairwell led up the side to the only door, a potted plant on the banister at the top. The neighborhood was quiet and well-lit by street lamps and front porch lights. The ocean was calm, at high-tide.

After a deep breath, Frank walked away from the window.

The F.B.I. car had hardly been parked half-hour before one of the two Agents had to piss. He complained about it, cringed, complained again ("I didn't think we'd be on stakeout all night or I'd've gone sooner"), and finally excused himself to piss in the bushes near the car.

They were parked half a block from 345 Sea Mountain Highway, where they had seen the target – Frank Lewis – pacing the windows, occasionally looking out, wandering, ducking out of sight, and so on. (They couldn't tell what he was doing, not even when he came outside to set up something under the house.) They has parked in a quiet area, one darker than its surroundings and hidden away from streetlamps between two dark houses.

The Agent had nearly finished pissing in the bushes when a drunk couple approached, stumbling down the sidewalk together, arm-in-arm. The short, mousy blonde was giggling while her slender boyfriend led them in a zig-zagpattern toward home.

The agent mumbled under his breath and quickly finished, zipping up and emerging from behind the bush to get back in the car. The couple passed and the mousy blonde giggled while the slender gentleman winked at the agent.

The F.B.I. agent gave the passing couple an authoritative nod and circled around the car and opened the passenger d—

A small group of men snuck up from the waterfront while the mousy blonde and slender gentleman (both drenched in fresh blood) approached from the street.

It was quiet, and this needed to be quick.

The first scream of agony came from a man in the small group—when a non-lethal bear trap caught his leg. It had been hidden in the brush between the house and the beach, and it shattered his tibia. He howled endlessly until one of the other men quickly stuck a knife in his throat, silencing him. They could have just knocked him unconscious, of course, but this wasn't a group of the gentle and caring; these were psychopaths, all murderers and rapists and awful human beings.

They only had two goals – to get the kid back, and to kill Frank Lewis.

The house was empty besides him. Frank's sister and nephew (a former police officer) had taken the kid to a nice hotel on the Myrtle Beach boardwalk, where the boy was to remain until further notice. That was hours earlier; since then, he had gone about acquiring weapons and booby traps. He kept the traps non-lethal (because he wanted to catch as many of these assholes as possible; well, that and because he feared the F.B.I. might trip one) but he had gotten his hands on a .12 gauge shotgun and two nine-millimeters.

It had been some time since he had been in a firefight and the anticipation of it filled his stomach with an old, familiar tingling, equal parts nervousness and adrenalized excitement…though, unlike previous gun fights, this time he was pretty hopped up on painkillers, which lent him an exuberant optimism.

Totally gonna survive this, he repeatedly thought to himself while setting up the traps.

Watching the group advance from the beach, Frank smiled. He had been right and now that douche-hound Tasker couldn't deny it – there was a leak, and it was coming from the F.B.I., from someone in his department…if not Agent Tasker himself.

Frank dialed the phone and put it to his ear but the P.A. office phone just rang and rang and rang—that's when Det. Lewis heard the man howling from the beach side of the house.

"Yessss!" he held up a triumphant arm, knowing the bear trap had been a success.

The phone rang once more before the line went dead and the power went out. No one had been in the PA office, though. This worried him. Someone was always in the PA office. Unless maybe Agent Tasker was actually on his way down there to personally apprehend him.

A quick yelp came from just under the house. This had to be from one of the rows of nails duct-taped to the concrete floor below. It had taken him the longest to set that up because, after he had pushed the nails through the duct-tape and set each strip with the short nails stuck pointing straight up, the gray duct-tape and nails still had to be painted with White Out in order to match the color of the concrete.

The nail had been invisible in the dark.

The man that had stepped on it quickly shut himself up to avoid the same fate as the previous howler. Plus, he enjoyed pain. He lifted his foot off the nail slowly and smiled to the others, leaving a trail of blood as they pushed onward, a bit more careful.

The slender gentleman and his mousy blonde cohort watched the bear trap catch the first guy and the nail trip up the second. They were street level and in front of the house. As of now, everything was still peaceful. But this Frank Lewis was obviously prepared, so they would have to think outside the box on this.

The slender gentleman leaned down and whispered something to the mousy blonde. Her eyes lit with excitement and she nodded, running off in the direction from which they had just come and disappearing into the darkness. The slender gentleman turned his attention down the street and found just what he was looking for, half a block away.

The group was still advancing, a gaggle of untrained killers. They stepped over a trip wire on the stairwell, climbed the stairs to the only door—an outward burst of splinters hit the man as he reached the top of the staircase. The blast hit him dead-center, the impact blowing him backward so hard that he broke through the banister, tumbling end-over-end in a mess of wood, blood, and splinter until he landed with an empty thud.

Franked cursed, as he knew his sister was gonna be pissed that he just destroyed the plant on her banister, as it was one of her favorite possessions. He cocked the shotgun, a used cartridge ejecting into the air as a second round pumped into the chamber, and he ducked back behind the couch.

These idiots didn't have a clue. Amateurs, pure rubbish. Easy. He was ready to take out a good deal of them. The location was impenetrable—unless they grab ladders. Shit. I didn't think about that. And I should have probably called the police. Double shit.

From the couch, he kept the shotgun pointed toward the door, waiting.

It was quiet out on the stairwell…

And then movement…they were descending, leaving.

"That was eas—"

The entire house shook violently.

A solid 4x4 truck was screeching its tires in the street.

The slender gentleman was driving.

The mousy blonde sat in the passenger seat, laughing hysterically.

A massive chain was tied around several of the support beams below the house.

The truck's engine stopped revving and reversed all the way back up to the house, and then he floored it again—

The house shook violently once more. The structure was weakening. The flooring creaked with pressure, crackling as it broke in unseen places. Shelves were collapsing, dishes falling to the floor, doors swinging opening…

Frank Lewis was caught off-guard a moment and tried hurriedly to form a plan—

The truck reversed, backing up to the house…

My sister's gonna kill me, he thought as the truck's engine roared a final time, and the beams collapsed, and the structure around him began to crumble downward into darkne—

Part 11

"—ake up—"

Detective Frank Lewis slowly opened his eyes—blinding sunlight—he winced and closed his eyes again. It had been hard to focus, to see anything at all. Blood had dripped from his forehead down over his right eye and it stung to open. His left eye felt like it hadn't been opened in months, a dry olive pit. And his arm hurt. And both legs. Everything, really, every part of his body ached.

Wa…was I hit by…a car?

"Wha…what happened?" he asked, his head drooping, his voice raspy from dehydration. He was foggy, his thoughts out-of-sequence and ethereal (—should have had coffee this…morning…or is it…)

"Heard you been lookin' for us?" spoke a deep male voice.

This hit him like smelling salts, like a burn to the skin, an injection of adrenalin. He opened his eyes and stared through the sting, through the dryness and pain. His vision was blurred, focusing randomly. The sun was shining and the day appeared beautiful, calm with a lulling breeze that occasionally whispered against his skin. An…enormous field sprawled outside the open doorway beside him. There was a garden, too…in the center, which people were tending – he could make out a shadowy figure picking…tomatoes?…

Then Det. Lewis took notice of his immediate surroundings.

He was in a chair. His wrists were duct-taped to the arms. His ankles were duct-taped to the chair legs. His body was covered in dirt and blood. And before him was a room full of people. Not just men but women and children as well. The man that had spoken was sitting on the floor with a five year old boy in his lap, Bryan Thomas. Taken most recently. The other boys were there, too, several of them; some leaned against older women while others sat cross-legged. Three were missing, he noted.

They were in a wooden shack, like a large shed with wide, glassless windows. His was the only chair and the rest of the area was empty aside from the dozen or so people – standing, leaning, sitting on the floor – with their attention squarely focused on Det. Frank Lewis.

He only recognized one person: that goddamn mousy blonde. He glared at her.

"Whoa there, cowboy," the gentleman spoke again, smiling.

He was a slender fellow, athletic but average otherwise, no older than 35. There was also a short, rounder man and a gangly, bearded, hillbilly man; the rest were women of various ages, some quite young and beautiful, some older and weathered.

"Who—" Frank began…

At that, the slender fellow cut him off:

"No need to talk, Frank Lewis. No need to talk because you, sir, are not gonna tell us what we want to know right now. And all what we want to know is: Where's Justin? You are gonna tell me, eventually, but you're a stubborn type and it won't be now – so save your voice until later, when I'm gonna pull it outta you slowly—reach into your heart and your brain and I'm gonna find out where my boy Justine is hiding. Even after you tell me where Justin is – and you will – I'm still gonna have fun. Torture you. Skin you within an inch of yo' life and yer gonna bbbeeeeeeeeg us to kill you, kill you quick, end it—

let me save you a hint'a mystery: We won't make it quick."

The slender gentleman spoke with calm passion, a polite smile across his lips as if he were complimenting Frank.

"You've taken from us one of our most precious resources, one of our most important assets. You've taken a part of our next generation, our legacy, our future. Justin…" he looked off a moment, then back. "We want him back more than anything you've ever wanted in your pathetic life. And our boy – our bright, shining pupil – he don't know his way home, you see. He needs me, needs us…" He licked his lips and, from his seat on the ground, with a boy in his lap, he shot a sorrowful glance up and around to the people near him. They could sense he was in need and those nearest leaned down to hug his shoulders, to embrace him, to let him kiss their arms, let him know they were there for him.

"Thought you should meet the family. We even got some new additions, some young healthy angels." He playfully rubbed the head of the boy in his lap. "A few didn't make it, of course—a few weren't angels, and those little boys had to be set free into the celestial ether, joint back up with the mama force—but we got a few sturdy additions," and he shook the boy in his lap gently, with pride, "thanks to the Queen."

As he said it, everyone quickly chanted, in a whisper, "Humbled by the Queen."

"We got a long way to go, buckoo. And we got all the time in the world to do it."

Detective Frank Lewis guffawed at this last statement.

"You wait, and you watch whoever comes, and you let them do whatever they do, okay?" Frank Lewis had told his nephew, a former police officer, the day before. "Even if it means they kill me and burn down your mom's house, you follow them. You don't worry about me, don't worry about nothing except them. You follow them no matter where they go, you stay with them. I expect more than one person's gonna show up and if they split, you follow one. Anyone. Something tells me they're all heading back to the same place. And you follow them there. Wherever. They. Go. Get a full tank of gas and you keep an extra three gas-cans in the trunk. They're gonna be heading north, prolly 10 hours. Maybe more. You stay out of the way, stay back, out of sight, and you find out where they're headed, and then you call the police. Okay?"

"Could everyone excuse us please?"

The slender gentleman stood up as everyone else piled out through the doorway. He walked over and knelt beside the detective.

"We're gonna hold off until daily chores are done and dinner's been ate…until then, you can go on and try an' escape. Chair's bolted to the ground. Wood's a sturdy oak. And duct-tape hold real good now." He smiled. "I want you to sit here and think of all the awful things I'm gonna do to you at dusk. All night. And tomorrow and the day after…"

"Hey," groaned Det. Frank Lewis, his voice hushed and raspy, "I want you to know…" and he stared into the slender gentleman's eyes, "…that I'm gonna rain on your parade."

"Oh is that right?" laughed the slender gentleman.

"Yeah," Frank smirked back. "Big time. And when I get my hands on you, I promise, it'll be quick."

"Fan-tastic!" the slender gentleman laughed again; this time, though, his eyes flashed a mad zeal, like

a wild animal. His smile was curdled, his thin lips like spider's legs.

After the slender gentleman had left, Frank immediately regretted using the threat, Rain on your parade. He could do better. All the threats in the world and I gotta use the one that involves bad weather and kid's floats. His brain was still a bit stilted, slow, dreary.

A square-ish sedan pulled up to the road block.

Agent Chintzy parked and stepped out. He was in a fresh suit, newly showered and groomed. His sunglasses were expensive, his posture was straight, and his demeanor was serious. He flashed his badge to all the officers and pushed through the barricade.

"Bring me the senior officer," he demanded.

A nearby officer ran off.

Two men came back.

"Who's this?" Agent Chintzy asked the Sergeant in charge, motioning toward the man in plain clothes beside him.

"This is Frank Lewis' nephew," answered the senior officer. "He called us, told us the situation. We set up a perimeter—"

"Arrest that man," interrupted Agent Chintzy, pointing to Frank's nephew.

Nobody moved.

"Did I fucking stutter? Arrest this man for aiding and abetting a wanted criminal."

"I don't follow," the senior officer shook his head, confused, "this man isn't—"

Agent Chintzy whistled for everyone to turn their attention on him, and he called out:

"My name is Agent John Chintzy. This here is a FED-ER-AL case. I am assuming command, and you will listen to me. This man," he pointed at the nephew, "will be cuffed and escorted to the nearest station for future questioning." He waited until an officer cuffed Frank's nephew, against his will, and put him in the backseat of a patrol car. "In this camp is a man named Frank Lewis. This man is a wanted serial killer. He's responsible and accountable for the deaths of a countless mass – including children. He is also the only suspect in the recent disappearance of a federal agent. This man is pure, unadulterated evil – and I want him stopped. Immediately. The residents of this commune are assumed to have no connection with this situation. They are to be considered his hostages." He checked his watch. "We advance the camp at nightfall. Frank Lewis is our primary target. If you see him, do not hesitate—because he won't. Shoot to kill."

Part 12

NOVEMBER, 1954

A veteran of the Korean War returned home to his wife and children at their West Virginia farm. He walked up the long drive to the door and opened it and quietly walked in. He hung his hat and coat on the rack and, before his family had even heard his arrival, began stacking all the furniture in their living room.

The young boys were out tending to the animals and corn crop when their father came home. There were four: Luke, Mark, Paul, and John; and no four brothers had ever been so different. Luke was short as a child (a hindrance that would follow him throughout life) and had developed a stutter the afternoon a mule kicked him in the temple. He was the baby of the bunch. Mark was gangly and weird, outspoken and often hostile. Paul was slender but athletic and attractive, the only one of them that was truly charming. And John was the oldest, the smartest, and a sort of leader to the boys; though his penchant for poor hygiene often left him alone, when he would spend his time thinking, scheming. They were troublemakers, the lot of them, and all four boys had been home-schooled after successive incidents at the local elementary.

Their mother was a kind woman, though a bit lonely and gullible. She believed every word her husband said the afternoon he returned home, when she stumbled upon the clatter in their living room and he hurriedly warned her of the future:

“Eisenhower says they’re comin’, in a big way. Commies are gonna take over the world.” He kept repeating the latter. This was a war he had grown too old to go and fight overseas…

But he had another plan, one that would save them. A sovereign nation right on their land. He had already used his status as Sergeant Major to expedite the paperwork protecting their property from trespassers, developers, and prospectors, successfully boxing the 40 acre farm as a preservation, of sorts. Most of it was forest; only one road in; and, at the center, a 10 acre stretch with a crop field, several animal enclosures, a barn, and housing, with plenty of space leftover for whatever else they might need. They were going to be self-sufficient.

No electricity. No government. Nobody else.

In his panicked haste, their father wanted to make sure that, if trouble ever arrive, the family would be able to barricade themselves inside at a moment’s notice; he accomplished his task, destroying all of their furniture in the process, and created shutter-like barriers for the inside of every window and exit.

But that was only the beginning…

Over the next few years, the Sergeant Major and his four boys built up the farm. They cut down trees and turned it to lumber, which they used to build a thick fence around the parameter (which took nearly an entire year). The excess lumber was used to build a large armory shed, as well as four “houses” for each of the boys. (These houses were more like large shacks; the boys continued to live in the main house but used these “homes” as their own private sanctuaries.) Land was developed for more crops, different crops that they grew over the different seasons, and they lived off the surplus during winter.

It went well, those first couple years…

Their mother was mostly housebound, cooking for the family and cleaning the house. She would occasionally tend to her horse in the barn, and she spent every afternoon reading adventure books and daydreaming. There was a hint of mischief in their mother, a love of the world and of grand fantasy, of something greater. It was a passion she tried to share with the boys nightly, when she would sit in a rocking chair in front of the fireplace and read long passages from her favorite books, the boys fully invested and often staring off in disbelief…

One day rummaging through the attack, she found what looked like a bird mask. She brought it downstairs and set it on the kitchen table and returned to cooking and cleaning, occasionally glancing over at the odd mask. Something about it fascinated her.

When her husband returned mid-day to check on her and use the privy in back, he found the mask and quickly relayed its origin:

"My great uncle Tom gave me that when I was knee high. Said it was a doctor's mask or something supposed to prevent the plague, always said it was good luck."

That night, as with every night, the boys gathered in the living room and sat side-by-side on a couch stuffed full of sheep's wool. (All of the furniture had been rebuilt after that fateful day, when their father returned home from war.) Their mother would read to them in front of the fire, always, but on that night, she came out wearing the fascinating bird mask and an overcoat to hide her body.

"Hello, young boys," she greeted in a joyous, high-pitched voice. "I'mQueen Persephony."

John, the oldest, rolled his eyes, as he felt (at 11) that he was already too old for such tomfoolery; the other boys, however, were immediately intrigued…and, over time, John was won over by his mother's play acting. She would stand between them and a blaze in the fireplace, the rest of the room dark – no electricity, only candles, only firelight. And she would act out the adventures she had read that day, reciting the works of Conan Doyle (John's favorite) and Melville and Shelly, tales of street fighters and monsters and the world across the ocean.

Their father was unaware of this. He spent his evening cleaning the guns in the armory, always had. It was a routine that had been instilled in him during his army years and it wasn't going to stop any time soon – chow, then weapons assemblage. As the armory took a lantern and long walk to reach, he was always out of earshot during story-time – had been during the war, when the tradition started, and continued long after he returned.

OCTOBER, 1965

The thunder was as loud as it had ever been, epic gashes of light across the sky.

The children were scared and hiding in various spots around the house, not in fear of the raging thunderstorm outside…but of their father, who was stalking from room to room inside the dark house. Their mother and youngest brother, Luke, were hiding in a closet. John had run from the house, to his "home" away from home in the shack built around the field. Paul was under his bed. Mark was under the kitchen sink.

Their father's breathing sounded like low growls.

"I just want to talk, baby," he called out.

In his hand was a detached bayonet, one he had sharpened to a dangerous point.

Thunder crashed outside, striking a nearby tree. No rain, not yet.

The man had snapped seemingly overnight, though in reality his progression towards madness had been lifelong. Seclusion had been the answer to his problems with the world – government rule, a fear of the unknown – but in ten years of nearly complete seclusion, he had every day taken a step towards insanity. The atrocities he had seen during war haunted him more and more until he could think of nothing else. His irrational fears had begun to seep into talks with his children (who were now older, ranging from mid-teens to early-twenties) and they grew more and more bizarre.

It was a frog in slow-boiling water: at first, they didn't notice the temperatures rising, as their father's rants became longer, more radical and unhinged; it worsened over time until the enemy was no longer just commies but people in general and their dark hearts; and then one day it boiled over, and the family found themselves in scolding hot water.

Their patriarch had decided that everyone was evil, including his blasphemous wife spitting devil stories to his children every night in front of a satanic fire; all the way down to his ungrateful children, all of whom had been soaking up these poisoned words for years so that, one day, they could ruin him, ruin the farm, destroy the world.

Walking from room to room, their father sang:

The husband catches a wife… The husband catches a wife… Hiiiiiiiii Hooooooo the Diary-oooo The husband catches a wife—

And he tore open the closet, where his ungrateful son Luke and his disloyal wife were hiding, and he thrust his bayonet in, and there was a bright FLASH like thunder…

His chest hurt. He looked down. Blood pumped out of his body, gushing all over himself. He stepped back, and back again, finally falling to his knees, and then to the ground, dead.

She had shot him a moment too late. The bayonet had pierced her chest in the same moment she pulled the trigger. Luke helped lay her out on the floor, crying out for his brothers, screaming for help, until Paul and Mark emerged.

When John arrived soon after, they used a sheet to help lift them mother up and onto a bed. None of the boys had seen a hospital in years, no doctors nearby, no phone or electricity…their mother was dying. Their mother would die and there was nothing they could do. The brothers curled up against her during those final hours, as her breathing shallowed. They held her hand and kissed her forehead and cried against her until the breathing slowed; in, out, in…out…

APRIL, 1968

This was the lowest point for the brothers…

The farm had fallen into hard disarray over the years since their parents' death. They sold all of the weapons in the armory, sold crops they needed to survive the winter, sold anything they could just to buy the supplies they had taken for granted; and they needed more hands, more tending, more eyes on the garden and animals. Four people just wasn't enough…

John (the oldest) was forced to leave in search of an honest wage. They needed money for grain and new tools and supplies if they were going to survive another winter, so he got a job with the local law enforcement. Even though John had barely spent time away from the farm, and had met only a handful of people in his lifetime, the young man fit in surprisingly well – because he had been raised to be hard working, a good listener, intelligent, and he followed orders to a T.

The portly, stuttering Luke remained home (the only brother to never leave) while Paul and Mark became more adventurous, wandering farther and farther from home…

And then came a day when the two brothers found life outside the farm. Up until then, John had always been in charge of supplies, always the brother to interact with the outside world on a regular basis. He had been old enough to remember the days before their dad returned home, when their mother would take them to the local shops for ice cream.

The other boys, however, didn't remember the towns, and they hadn't interacted with the people, no one outside the family aside from an occasional doctor's visit. So when they found an older woman bathing in the nearby lake, Mark and Paul literally had no idea how to act – and so they resorted to their most basic of instincts.

John returned home the next morning, exhausted from a long night patrolling the area in search of a woman that hadn't returned home the previous evening…only to find her in one of the shacks, beaten unconscious and tied up.

Mark, Paul, and Luke were curled around her, blissfully sleeping.

It was this moment that their roles became defined, that everything clicked for the brothers – John understood it then and explained it to the others later that day. They had been missing something all along: family. Family would solve their problems. Family would provide hands for the crops. Family would provide love for the men.

And John would protect them.

DECEMBER, 1972

Over a period of three years, John solved more criminal cases than any other officer in West Virginia. It was as if he had a sixth for criminals and it took him all over the state. In 1972, he was transferred to Richmond, Virginia for an experimental program that compiled and detailed the basic characteristics of a killer – what they thought, how they acted, why they did what they did.

Nobody realized that he was so good at identifying killers because he was a high-functioning sociopath; well, that and because he would occasionally plant evidence in order to frame someone for his brothers' crimes. (They had committed so many crimes in West Virginia that John had banished them from the state; their crimes would have to be elsewhere in the northeast, anywhere that winter froze out an entire season of crime.)

MARCH, 1973

The first kid they kidnapped was an adorable, mousy blonde girl.

The second kid didn't survive the kidnapping.

The third was an autistic 14 year old from a broken family. He was the only teen they would ever kidnap. John picked him because of the sympathy he felt for the kid – broken home, murderous family…too odd to fit in yet too smart to disappear.

There were a few others but they didn't survive.

The new family didn't have many survivors of the first generation, mostly because the kids against their will (and by big and scary men, no less). It took the brothers some time to realize that, if only they made the children wantto come with them, a higher percentage would survive because the victims would fight less.

At the same time, John was incorporating these ideas into his work. “The Theory of Incentivized Kidnapping” quickly became a staple in preventing child abductions. It also served as a massive boon for John’s profiling work, heralding national acclaim.

Knowing that they needed the kids to want to join them was only half the battle. John told them that, based on his research, it would take something stronger than candy or a bicycle if the purpose was to get a child to submit. No child was going to submit completely, not even the children they were targeting – kids in poor neighborhoods, abusive households, kids with criminal parents, etc. – but to sever the family ties, to convince the child to stay forever, they’d need a symbol…

And in the warped minds of the brothers, nothing was more caring or gentle or motherly than a plague mask and overcoat. To these boys (all of them in their twenties), nothing was as calming as the mask and attire and high-pitched voice that their mother had donned while describing adventures across the world.

AUGUST, 1985

“This is John looking for Mark, Paul, or Luke. Repeat…” and he repeated this several times until Paul came on the line.

“This is Paul. Over.”

“Paul, the time has come. Over.”

“Where are you? Over.”

“There’s a police perimeter around the farm. They’re here. They found us. I bought a few hours. You have until nightfall. I won’t be able to hold them off any longer than that. There was too much destruction in South Carolina, it's national news. These cops are going to be coming in hot. I’ve persuaded them to consider the residents as hostages, that that fuck Frank Lewis did this, that he's responsible—they’re coming in for him. Over.”

“Then…what do you mean the time has come? Over.”

“Paul, as soon as they start asking questions, what do you think they're gonna find? Cops aren’t stupid. And as soon as they take any DNA and see if it matches anything – they’re gonna find it matches every goddamn crime scene in the northeast. This is it. This is the end. We knew it would come. Be a man. The potassium is in the back shed. Get it done. I’ll be coming in with the police just after nightfall. And you make sure you kill that motherfucker Frank Lewis. Over.”

"I'll kill him myself. Over."

"No, send her to do it. I want you and Luke and Mark together. Oversee that the rest do what they're told. I'll see you on the other side, brother. Over."

I’m so fucked, Frank Lewis thought to himself.

He was watching a team of men lift and haul a 7 ft. stage out into the open field. It stood between the garden and another of those wooden shacks, similar to the one he was in except it wasn’t as empty inside. Frank had his head turned toward the open door beside him, overlooking the field and the setting up of the evening’s festivities. They draped a large white sheet behind the stage as a backdrop.

I’m so fucked, he thought again.

His wrists and ankles were still duct-taped to a chair that was nailed to the floor. Even if he had the

strength (which he didn't), there was no chance of escape.

People beginning to scatter, to run from place to place, to hurry…something had happened.

And then the mousy blonde appeared in the doorway.

"Hey there, sexy!"

Giggling, she entered the shack. Her attire was like any girl her age, a cute pink top and black skirt. She appeared normal, all but for the large kitchen knife in her hand, always the kitchen knife – her weapon of choice.

"Ah fuck," Frank mumbled. If the past few days were any indication, this situation was going to end with him stabbed or cut somewhere on his body, if not dead.

"Look what I found in your car."

She held up his silver boom box; then set it on the ground and hit play. The Metallica album Ride the Lightning began to play.

This music might be the worst torture of all,Frank thought.

"Plans changed. Looks like I gotta make this quick," she said, prancing over to him. "Guess Justin's lost forever." She made a frowny face. "Too sad. He was so promising."

"He was a defenseless child!" Frank snarled.

"Maybe when we kidnapped him," chuckled the mousy blonde, "but he was a better killer than any of us. And believable, right? He pull the silent treatment? Give you the doe eyes? Justin's about as defenseless as I am right now. I'm just gonna set this right here—"

She stabbed the kitchen knife into Frank's wrist.

He howled in pain, squirming, grunting – he focused all his pain into rage, his eyes straight daggers at the mousy blonde. She didn't care. She was in the process of straddling him, sticking her legs under the arms of the chair so her pelvis was up against him.

"Think you can get hard for me, big boy?" she asked with a touch of innocence, lifting up her skirt and feeling around between their legs, shifting her underwear, fumbling with his zipper…

Frank's eyes flittered, his head beginning to droop.

"No-no-no, stay awake," she panicked, slapping his face, pulling his hair.

He mumbled something.

"What's that, sweetness?" the mousy blonde asked, leaning in.

"Rookie mistake," he growled—

The mousy blonde didn't have time to react. Frank hit her square in the nose with his forehead.

She fell back over his legs, disoriented, her legs still wrapped around him.

With all of his strength (pure adrenaline), Frank leaned his weight against the right chair arm and pushed forward—agonizingly, excruciatingly, with blinding pain—to tear the duct-tape. Her knife had nicked the bottom edge, taken a clear slice into it, and with just enough pressure, in just the right way…

The duct-tape tore. His right arm ripped up, free – even with a knife still jutting through his wrist. It had taken great effort to lift it, not just because of the duct-tape but because the knife had pierced him

so thoroughly that an inch of the blade passed entirely through his wrist and into the wood of the arm of the chair.

The mousy blonde was recovering from the blow to the face, furious—

Frank swung his balled up fist at her sideways—

The inch tip of the knife that had pushed its way through Frank's wrist found a new home inside the throat of the mousy blonde.

A gurgling noise emerged from her lips.

Frank thought she was about to try and attack but her movements were too constricted, too focused to a specific region...

She was grinding against him.

...another gurgled moan...

The knife tip had caught her right in the jugular and, when he pulled out the knife to do it again, a blood geyser sprayed every which direction, splashing all over his face and chest, all down his lap—she grinded harder, moaned louder, blood dripping from her lips. This didn't stop him from stabbing her again, and again - more blood spewing all over them, in his face, dying her blonde hair red - using a knife held solely through his own wrist.

Grinding against him in a shower of her own blood, the mousy blonde gave a final gurgled moan, mouthed the word "cumming," and died with a look of ecstasy in her eyes.

Part 13

Nolan had got out of high school and wanted to kick ass and take names, so he joined the police force; instead, he found himself doing paperwork and citing tourists. He quit after four years.

And not once during that time, nor in the two aimless years since, did he ever ride handcuffed in the back of a cruiser like he was at that moment.

"Dude, you gotta listen to me," he was pleading to the patrolman driving. "I was there, I saw what these people are capable of – those people at that farm are not hostages. You have to believe me."

The grouchy, mustached officer ignored him, brushing it off with a, "Just followin' orders."

Nolan grunted, then let out a disappointing sigh.

They parked at the station a couple minutes later, as it was only a dozen or so miles from the perimeter of the farm. The officer pulled Nolan from the backseat and walked him through the glass double doors and through the station, toward the back holding cell. It was a small station and there was only a single, 14 by 14 ft. cell lining the back wall; the rest was desks with typewriters and family photos, filing cabinets topped with plants, and walls covered in patrolman pictures with their award plaques.

The patrolman uncuffed him and shut the cage and sat at a nearby desk to fill out paperwork, a recognizable agony of police work. Nolan laughed to himself, not just at the paperwork but at the absurdity of the situation, the frustration of not helping. Finally a chance to kick ass and actually do something good and he was going to sit it out in a cell. He kept himself leaning against the bars, his arms hanging out and his eyes wandering the awards on the walls.

He made noises. Kicked at the bars. Fidgeted. Hummed.

He, like his uncle, enjoyed testing boundaries; in fact, Nolan was more like his uncle than he was any other member of his family. From a young age, he had admired Uncle Frank. In many ways, he still did. The man was a hero – and right now he was in trouble, and that bullshit F.B.I. Agent was gonna get him killed…an agent that looked suspiciously similar to a man in a nearby picture on the wall.

"Can you keep to yourself?" the patrolman called over, his body leaned in to better focus on the type-line of the page in the typewriter.

"Hey, who's that officer right there?" Nolan called over.

The officer ignored him.

"Hey," Nolan called over again, louder, pointing up at a picture on the wall, "who's that officer there? In that picture?"

The patrolman continued ignoring him.

"Yoo-whooo," he called over, even louder. "Come look at this. Come tell me that that guy, that guy right there in that picture…tell me that he doesn't lookexactly like the agent that just showed up." The patrolmen was still—"I can get a lot louder," he practically yelled, "or you could just come tell me who that man is!"

The mustached patrolman sighed, turned toward the picture, then turned back.

"It's a patrolman. Left a long time ago, before I worked here…"

John Chintzy was lucky no one had recognized him when he arrived at the police barricade. He knew long ago that his old department had been folded into a different district (on the opposite side of his farm) in the time since his absence from the local P.D. He had patrolled the area only a brief period before he was transferred to a town with a higher population. People could have possibly forgotten his quiet presence but it was also luck, as smaller departments were often kept "within the family," as they said; promotions from within, community hires, and so on. His chief had retired the year after he left and there were two others in the mean time, each with a short tenure (both ended by heart attacks). The older patrolmen were unfamiliar; the rest, young.

He was sitting in the sedan, waiting. He had told his brothers to hurry. Dusk was fast approaching, probably another hour or so before nightfall.

The C.B. buzzed to life…

"We're ready. Over."

"Copy. On my way. Over."

Agent Chintzy exited his square-ish sedan and called out to the herd of local police:

"Just got an order from the top – they say we aren't to wait. We move now. Form a straight line out," he pointed left and right, "stay out of the road, and begin advancing."

"Can you at least let me make a call?" Nolan called over.

The patrolman was still ignoring him.

"I was a police officer for four years, I know my rights. Let me make my call, it'll be quick."

"Then you know your rights vary depending on the situation in which you were apprehended," the patrolman called back, his face nearly against the paper in the typewriter in an attempt to spot an error in his text.

"Why don't you just climb inside the typewriter," Nolan joked, "might be easier." He backed from the bars and walked over to the tiny, lidless toilet.

"Man, I got to take a HUGE piss right now," he spoke as though he was talking to himself, only loud enough for the patrolman to hear, "but my aim is so bad – hope I don't piss all over the place." He said the last part especially loud.

No response.

Then, even louder…

"And something's definitely not right down there lately 'cause my piss has been smellin' an awful lot like old tuna for some reason – this situation might be about to get terrible. If only I just made a phone call. For some weird reason, that always helped my aim…"

The patrolman sighed, dropping his head a moment.

He stood, slowly ambled to the bars…

"You really former police," he asked.

Nolan nodded.

"Four years of service to the Myrtle Beach P.D."

"Who are you going to call?" the patrolman asked in a monotone, key ready.

“Family lawyer…?” Nolan half-asked, not really sure how to respond. He hadn’t expected to get out of the cell.

“I’m only doing this out of courtesy to a former officer. No funny stuff?”

“No funny stuff.”

He unlocked the cell door.

“Thank god,” Nolan confessed, walking out.

Before following the patrolman’s escort, he briefly stepped aside, to the picture he had been talking about.

“Wait, just come look at this guy – he looks exactly like the agent.”

For the first time, the patrolman showed a slight interest. He walked over and looked at the face, checked the name…

“Patrolman John Chintzy,” he read aloud.

“Holy shit!—that was the agent’s name, right?”

Nolan had just wanted to use the picture as a distraction but was genuinely shocked to find out it was, in fact, the federal agent, just younger.

The patrolman was agreed, still staring at the—

Nolan knocked the patrolman unconscious with a single blow to the chin.

“I am SO sorry,” he said, bending next to the unconscious officer for the keys to the patrol car.

The lemonade had been made in a large tub and included sugar, real lemon juice, water, ice cubes, and an extreme amount of potassium. A ladle was used to pour cup after cup, each cup stacked on a tray, two trays worth – 31 in total, one for everyone. The two trays were carried outside and brought to the wood stage in the center of the field, where everyone had gathered.

Queen Persephony was onstage, standing in front of the white sheet backdrop, the four youngest residents lined beside her. Dressed in her finest black overcoat, with a dark brim hat, she gazed over the crowd through the macabre, bird-like plague mask (their mother’s original).

The rest of the group stood in front of the small stage.

“Everyone, today is a special day!” giggled Queen Persephony in her high-pitched squeal. “I would like to make a toast.”

The portly brother, Luke, took one of the trays and began handing out the lemonade to the residents on the right side; the gangly, bearded brother Mark passed them out on the left side. Each resident took a cup and passed it down until every person had one; the remaining cups were brought to the stage, where one was handed to each child; then the two brothers took one and stood on either side of Queen Persephony as she took her own and lifted the cup into the air. Everyone mirrored her, though the kids took a bit of coaching. (“Don’t dr-dr-rink till we drink,” Luke told them.)

“You’ve all done such a wonderful job,” she went on, more joyous than ever, “and I wanted to pay you all a visit and tell you so. I wanted to reward you and what better way to do so than with a nice, cool cup of lemonade, in appreciation of your hard work.”

Then she turned to the children…

“And to the new generation of children, who have filled our lives with a greater sense of fulfillment and happiness…”

The group gazed up, adoringly.

“So to all of you, my angels,” Queen Persephony turned back to everyone, lifting her glass even higher, “I say thank you for everything you’ve done.”

And she brought the lemonade to her masked face…

Everyone did the same—

“HEY!” a voice screamed from the opposite end of the field.

Frank Lewis was covered in wet blood, from his head to his lap. Drenched through and through. He was limping forward, one arm cradled against his chest (obviously wounded and dripping more blood) while in the other hand he carried a large kitchen knife, the mousy blonde’s favorite.

“Drink up, everyone,” Queen Persephony demanded of her flock.

—“Bryan Thomas, Andrew Martins, Phillip Cress, Drew Mackey—your parents are worried sick!”—

The adults did as they were told…but the children hesitated.

Not only had they heard their names called, but they hadn’t seen Queen Persephony take her drink, nor either of the brothers—so they waited, as they had been ordered to drink when Luke drank.

Queen Persephony hadn’t noticed, as she was leaning close to Mark, the bearded one.

“Go handle it,” Queen Persephony whispered in a suspiciously male voice; then, to the portly brother Luke, demanded, “Go get the gun.”

Both brothers set their cups down on the stage. Luke disappeared toward one of the shacks. Mark grabbed a nearby board, holding it like a bat, and went straight at Frank.

The rest of the group was watching with interest, ready to involve themselves…when a quasi feeling hit each and every one of them. They dropped their empty cups to the ground and bent at the waist. Some moaned and cried out and fell to the ground instantly; others remained standing, puking, groaning, crying, pleading…but only for an extra moment before they, too, fell dead.

The children on stage cried out, dropped their lemonades, huddled together, all of them terrified.

“Come with me, kiddies,” Queen Persephony returned to her normal, bubbly self. “Let’s go somewhere safe.”

Taking full advantage of the kids’ fear and trust of her, she ushered them away.

Frank continued limping toward the fast approaching, gangly, bearded Mark. The man held the board with both hands like a baseball bat, an angry scowl on his face. Frank switched the knife to his wounded left hand and dropped both arms to his side. Mark’s pace was quick, determined; Frank’s was slow, wounded.

And then they were within feet of one another.

Mark lifted the board, ready to swing it with all his weight—

But Frank took three quick, light-footed steps forward and, in a powerful, upward blow, slammed the front two knuckles of his right fist straight into Mark’s gaunt throat. The thin man gasped, his larynx utterly crushed—but then the second blow, lightning fast, landed square in the center of his nose and

knocked him out cold. He fell like a rock, unconscious, struggling to breath, choking on the blood draining down the back of his throat, drowning, gurgling, unable to breath and dying quickly.

And limping forward, Frank grunted, “Bitch.”

Part 14

As he stumbled on, leaving the body gasping on the ground behind him, Frank Lewis heard the sirens of approaching police. He dropped his knife and laughed, thanking the Lord; finally, he could rest. An entire police department could just go rescue those poor kids now and he could fuck off to nowhere and sleep for days. (The police had had taken so long that he thought his nephew might have failed – after all, it wasn't easy to follow someone for hours and hours, from S.C. to wherever-the-fuck they were up north – but his nephew was just like him, good police…and he believed that, if anyone could do it, Nolan could.)

Only one police car was approaching…

"Oh for Christ's sakes," Frank whined and bent over and picked up the knife.

One police car's worth of police wasn't enough.

The car drove off the single road in and straight through the field and pulled up alongside Frank.

There was a shuffling inside before the window rolled down.

"Nolan?" he asked, confused.

"Get in, quick. The police—"

Frank hobbled to the other side of the car and got in.

"—the kids," he interrupted, pointing forward. "That way. Sum'bitch took 'em and I don't know what he intends to do but it certainly ain't good and we got precious few minutes to stop him."

Nolan had accelerated at the word "kids" and followed Frank's point.

The police cruiser blew past the dead bodies and the stage.

"What the fuck?" Nolan exclaimed.

"No survivors," Frank said low, his eyes narrowed in sadness at all the lives lost. So many…

There was a structure in the distance, where Frank had seen the men lead the children. He was fairly certain they were still there. "They're in there, two of them. At least one of them is armed…and they got four of the missing kids with them."

"Four?" Nolan asked, looking over. "I thought there were seven?"

Sadness returned to Frank's eyes, though he spoke no further.

"Here…" Nolan handed him the revolver he had taken off the unconscious police officer. There was also a shotgun locked upright in the space between the seats.

"There's an F.B.I. agent leading the police here right now, they're gonna be here any minute—this guy wants you dead." Nolan explained as much as he could as quickly as possible, adding at the end, "Guy used to work for the local P.D. here. Someone named Chintzy…"

Frank was searching the car. He found extra rounds for the revolver in the glove box. And a knife. And flashlight. But then his mind snapped back like a rubber-band and his hands stopped. He thought this information over and shook his head in anger, upset that back-up wasn't really coming—that Chintzy was the obvious leak—that a firing squad was approaching—that, even with his many wounds, he was still going to have to go finish this himself—that-that…

Frank groaned, dismissed it all, and removed his button-up, undressed to his under shirt, and checked

himself over. He had bled all over the place. A bottle of water sat in the cup holder (—bottled water, what'll they think of next, Frank quickly thought, as he had never seen someone buy water before) and he used it to rinse off the blood from his face and parts of his body. Below the seat was an officer first-aid kit and he used the gauze to wrap up the gaping hole in his left wrist, and bandages to blot various other wounds. The stitches from the stab wound in his leg had opened again and he wrapped it once more.

The car slowed.

They had arrived.

The original farm house had fallen into complete disarray over the years. Vines covered the rotted wood exterior. Weeds and bramble grew all around the outside. Shutters dangled from broken windows boarded up from the inside. The awning over the porch was half-collapsed and covered in decayed brush. A section of the roof was missing. Nobody had been there in years.

Frank studied the exterior, revolver cocked at his side.

Nolan was beside him, shotgun in hand.

"You take the back," he ordered Nolan, no longer his nephew but a fellow soldier, a war-born brother. "Keep your head down. It's gonna be dark."

Frank was able to use his left hand a bare minimum, just grabbing and lifting, really – and he went to hand Nolan the flashlight he had found in the glove box.

Nolan shook his head and showed Frank the flashlight on his keychain before running off behind the house. (Handy—he had never seen a keychain flashlight before.)

Frank walked up the rotted steps to the obstructed front door. It was open and barely accessible, nearly blocked by the shredded wood and jagged shingles of a half-collapsed porch roof. He had to squeeze through.

It was sheer darkness inside, a world apart from the outside; musty, suffocating in its claustrophobia, disorienting. He flicked on the flashlight. The beam lit scarce details. An old bookshelf. An older table. Rugs in tatters. Webs in corners. Dust particles floating in a cylinder of light. A mirror in the nearby room. Silence in every direction, blackness—always goddamn blackness.

There were two men inside that house, somewhere. And four little boys.

Frank tried to move silently but it was impossible. The wooden boards of the floor had been warped from exposure to rain. Everything creaked, and it creaked along borders and across rooms.

Nolan was in the back of the house; he could hear him creaking along, as well.

Frank moved through the living room and found the staircase leading to the second floor. Each stepped squealed under the pressure of his foot. He had the gun raised and focused forward, with the flashlight in his left hand, alongside it. He couldn't see much at the top of the stairs. A hallway. Several rooms.

Creeeeeeaaaaaaak—old hinges screamed as a nearby door slowly opened.

Nolan was in the kitchen.

Maggots lined the counters where old food once sat. The stench of old rot and must was

overwhelming and he covered the bottom half of his face with his shirt. No one had been in this kitchen in many years, and it had been abandoned quickly. Glasses were still in the sink. A nearby fruit basket was filled with a throbbing black goo, in what must have been fruit a decade ago; it was so full of maggots that it pulsated.

Nolan turned the aim of the shotgun (the light was in his left hand, pointing forward down the barrel, gripped between his palm and the shotgun stock), and he went about checking each direction. There were two separate hallways leading out—a scratching nearby.

He turned, ready to fire.

A nest of rats were chewing on some ragged, long dead animal in the corner.

The door had opened slightly.

Frank approached the nearby room and pushed the door open.

It was an old bedroom. There was a body on the bed, withered to nothing but brittle gray bone in an old dress. Extra dust in the air, decayed skin particles stirred up by something recent. An old dresser lined the back of the room, with a full mirror. He saw something in the reflection, something moving, something on the other side of the bed—

Nolan moved into the hallway, the shotgun pressed against his shoulder, aiming forward, the beam following the barrel. The living room was wide and full of wilted decorations and drooping, stained furniture. The fabric had turned a soggy, mildewed black. He checked his corners. Nothing. There was a nearby staircase and he could see glimpses of a light at the top of the stairs, Uncle Frank.

There was noise, talking from above – rushed and low.

Nolan ran up the stairs. He reached the top and looked down the hallway, to the left, right—

At the end of the hallway was a portly man but he quickly ducked into a nearby room.

Nolan was after him, running—

There were whimpers from behind the bed.

Each of the kids was cowering behind the bed, on the far side.

Frank ran to them, bending down beside the bed. He tried to soothe the kids but they were too scared, one pointing—then all of them pointing back, behind Frank—

Someone else was in the room. He turned the flashlight.

Dark brim hat. Black overcoat. The glass of the eyes in the plague mask reflected the light. The figure had been hidden behind the door but now it was close, over him—

—and kicking the door open, Nolan rushed inside the room.

The portly fellow fired a shot. The room lit up in an explosion from the muzzle of a handgun. The bullet hit wood near Nolan's head—it was the first time anyone had fired a bullet at him. Shaken, he dropped to the floor and fired back.

The shotgun blast echoed through the house, reverberating in the rafters and floorboards. It hit near the portly fellow, who fired shot—BANG—after shot—BANG—after shot—BANG—at Nolan, but each was too high, too wide, the shooter unpracticed.

Nolan cocked the shotgun—chick—the chamber tossed an empty shell into the air--chick—a second round in the chamber—and then the shotgun released another blast, the muzzle erupting in an explosion of fire that lit the room in orange/white.

The second shot hit the portly man in the collar and threw him back with such force that he smashed into the wall behind him, hitting it with a deep, cratered dent before falling to the ground…

Nolan fired another shot into the man on the ground, leaving no risk.

Frank dropped the revolver and he couldn't breathe, a plastic bag wrapped across his face.Queen Persephony was behind him, holding the plastic tight across Frank's face, over his mouth and nose, depriving him of air—

But she had underestimated Frank's weight, his strength, and Frank stood up so that the person was up against him, holding on, like a piggy back—and Frank ran backwards so hard and fast that he knocked the bedroom door off its hinges—back in the second floor hallway, from one doorway and in through another, directly across from the bedroom, into another bedroom—Frank hit against a mirror stuck up on the back wall, shattering it to pieces, with an impact so hard that both men dropped.

Free from the plastic around his face, Frank stood and kicked atQueen Persephony—but the kick was dodged, deflected, and figure was again charging at Frank.

A burning pain filled his body, emanating from his belly—

"Get down," a voice called from the doorway.

Frank ducked and a blast erupted from the doorway—it hit the window behind Queen Persephony and a bright ray of daylight filtered through the many buckshot holes, a large area lit.

Nolan cocked the gun again but it was empty—

—Queen Persephony had been ready, out of the way, moving forward—

But Frank had been there, had been ready first, had ducked down like a line-backer to thrust forward —he charged with his shoulder, using as much force as he could physically gather, and he hit Queen Persephonyin the mid-section, liftingher up and back with his momentum—fast and hard—and straight out through the boarded window.

The body tumbled through the wood and out the window—upside-down, end over end, the mask and hat flying off—and over the second story gutter, down into a messy pit of twisted metal and jagged lumber gathered at the bottom.

Nolan and Frank stood at the window, looking down.

The slender brother, Paul—his face finally revealed—had landed hard on a sharp edge of metal. It was protruding, dripping blood and gore, through the chest of his overcoat. He struggled, gasping, choking out blood, coughing—his eyes wide with fear, dashing, searching—choking, gasping… gone…

Frank examined himself in the light of the now-open window. He had been stuck in the gut by a large shard of broken mirror. It stuck from his belly, gushing pints of blood. He was weak, growing weaker. Nolan supported him, draped Frank's arm across his shoulder, and they walked back through the house, back to the bedroom. Frank's revolver was on the ground and Nolan bent down and picked it up and tucked it in the back of his pants, just in case there were any more psychos.

Four terrified children were hiding behind the bed and Nolan called to them, reassured them that the terror was over…

Reluctantly, the kids emerged one by one and followed Nolan as he walked side-by-side with Frank, supporting his uncle down the stairs and through the narrow doorway leading outside, into the beautiful dusk of an August evening.

No sooner had they emerged from the house, stumbling down the front porch steps, when—

"FREEZE!" an officer called out.

The house was surrounded by police, all with their guns drawn and pointed at Nolan and Frank.

"No-no-no," Nolan called out and lifted his hands, proving he wasn't a threat. He stood in front of Frank—who barely remained standing on his own—and Nolan used his body as a shield, blocking Frank from their aim, knowing full well that they intended to shoot him.

The children came out of the house and found guns trained at them—and they stopped in their tracks on either side of Nolan and Frank.

Upon seeing the children, the officers lowered their aim.

Agent Chintzy emerged through the line of police, his weapon drawn but lowered at his side.

"This man just saved these children—he is NOT your enemy," Nolan called out in defiance. "If you want to shoot him, you're going to have to go through me."

"So be it," Agent Chintzy called back, raising his gun—

Frank grabbed the revolver tucked in the back of Nolan's pants before pushing his nephew to the ground.

Shot after shot was fired—

—Agent Chintzy shot Frank in the leg, and then the chest—

—and Frank got off a single shot, hitting Agent Chintzy square in the face—

The police let out a hail of gunfire, their weapons lifted and shooting bullet after bullet until Frank had been hit nearly a dozen times.

Nolan cried out, on the ground with the children. He crawled over to his uncle, who lay on the ground, his breath but a murmur. His eyes weren't wide and searching, nor panicked; they were peaceful, ready. Accepting. He had a smile on his lips, and he mouthed a single word…

rest

…and then his eyes glazed over, and his body went limp.

Part 15

As a child, there was a time when I told my mother that Queen Persephone was talking to me on the upstairs baby monitor, which led to a very real situation where I was nearly kidnapped by a psycho in a plague mask that had been talking to me (through my hacked baby monitor) from the street outside my bedroom window. Other kids weren't as lucky as I was, and seven children were taken when all was said and done.

Years passed and I grew up (sort of) and became a writer. I stayed mostly to fiction; now, 20 years into my writing career, I've found myself drifting into non-fiction, specifically journalism. And since this nightmarish childhood memory of Queen Persephone has always fascinated me, I let it fuel my first true crime endeavor, the novel Persephone.

Even though the case is technically closed, I went after the story as if I were a detective researching an old, unsolved crime. Most of my time was spent looking at old case-files but the interesting bits came from my interviews with a man who was actually there for it, Nolan Lewis. It was his uncle, Frank Lewis, who ultimately sacrificed his life to solve the crime – a man who, in the years after, became legend amongst police and even helped shape F.B.I. profiling.

(I met Frank Lewis once, as a kid. He was the detective on the originalQueen Persephone case and I met him when I was nearly kidnapped. Though my memory of him was a bit foggy, it was instantly refreshed as I found his nephew Nolan to be a spitting image of the man in nearly every way; balding, overweight in the mid-section, with tired, focused eyes, like a teacher.)

The case was long and violent, spanning most of the northeast, and the child abductions were only the beginning…

Nolan had a unique perspective on the case, as his mother was considered the final victim…

In the years since his mother's death, Nolan had become a licensed private investigator and had accumulated many other books' worth of interesting stories to tell, but it was my feeling that he had done so (at least originally) to better solve his own mother's death.

She had been supervising a damaged teenage boy related to the case, a boy named Justin Beach…a boy that hadn't been seen or heard from since that day. The police tied her death to the Queen Persephone case and closed the book, though Nolan always thought there was more to it, that maybe others had been involved, or maybe the boy hadn't been who he seemed…maybe Justin had killed Nolan's mother and left, vanished into the night.

It was all interesting but, as there was no supporting evidence in the 20 years since, it was also subjective.

Justin never resurfaced and was presumed dead, like many others involved in the case…

It was around that time, however, that I started receiving odd voicemails on my phone. They were scratchy, like a recording of static. The number was always private and I thought them odd, at the time…

Anyway, I got all the info I needed and, with my dramatic flair, wrote a book about the case, and now it's out on shelves across the full spectrum of digital retailers everywhere.

And since the release, those voicemails have gotten worse, a lot worse…longer, louder, more defined…

Sometimes I answer but there's no one on the other end, just more static, just noise. I ask, "Who is this?" and make threats but never get a response.

Sometimes I think I can hear distant laughing, though.

The phone company's been unable to help, unable to locate the source of the call or even block it in any way – as it had begun calling nearly every night.

I even changed my number. Still, calls every night. Scratchy, like long winds blowing in the mouthpiece.

Sometimes I think I can hear an awful voice – distorted, barely human, unnaturally slow and screechy…Heeeeeeeeeeellllllllllloooooooo, it seems to say in a tone like the scratching of a record.

I told Nolan recently, through e-mail, and he said it might be related to the case – maybe someone involved peripherally, maybe even Justin Beach, the disappeared teenager; or maybe it was a different psycho, or maybe just a fan of my writing, or maybe a glitch in telecommunications. He told me to alert the police and keep eyes out for anything suspicious and my doors locked, but that it would probably just go away.

And then came last night...

I was sitting at my computer, working on my next non-fiction bookWhen the Clouds Roll In, when my iPhone lit up beside me, like it does when I've just received a text...except there was nothing displayed but a black screen.

I picked it up and hit a button, thinking it was dying or dead, but found more nothing...

Until I noticed it was making low noises...

...and that's when I heard a voice I haven't heard in years, not since I was a boy; a voice that was high-pitched and bubbly, happy—and shesaid:

"We've missed you, my angel..."